



VICTOR KIN
ACROSS
the **LINES**

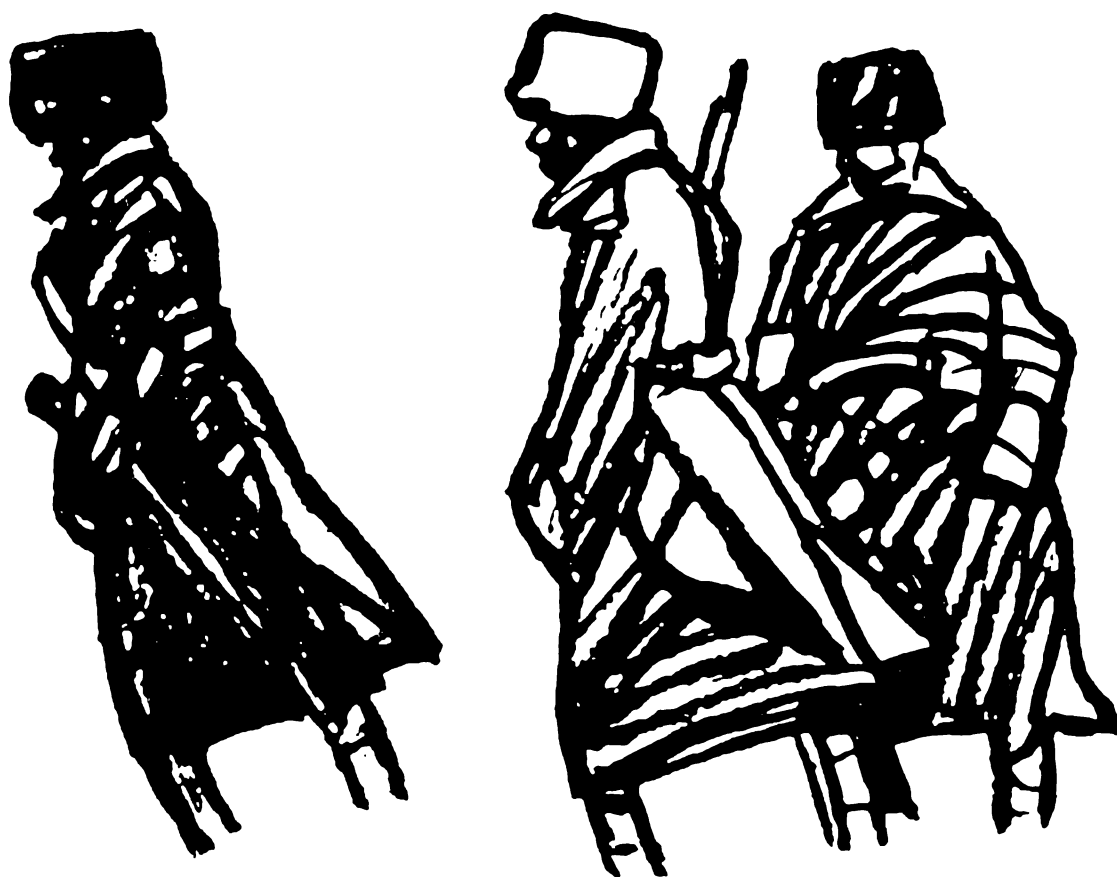
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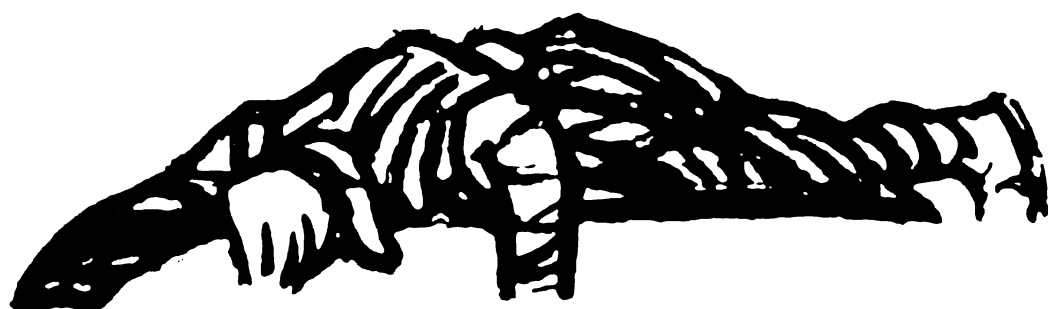


V I C T O R K I N



Виктор Кин
ПОТУ/СТОРОНУ

ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО
ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ
Москва



VICTOR KIN
ACROSS THE LINES

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TOO MUCH NATURE

"I KNEW it," said Bezais, picking at the putty on the window. "There's another of those chicken-sheds over there. The train's going to stop near it and wait five hours until it's had enough. I'm just itching to jump out and give it a shove or two, just to make it go a bit faster."

Bezais stole a glance at Matveyev. Matveyev was sitting on an upturned packing-case drawing five-pointed stars on the palm of his hand in indelible pencil. It was evening. Sleet was falling outside. There was a murky light inside the empty saloon-car. A bottle rolled noisily about the floor. For over an hour Matveyev had been waiting for it to roll into a corner and stop rattling, but the bottle went on rolling. Finally he got up, swore, and tossed the bottle through the door. Bezais watched him with a bored expression and turned back to the window. He was wrong: this time the train did not stop.

"This Amur railway is an utter wreck," Bezais resumed after a pause. "The guard told me the sleepers

are quite rotten. You can put your finger through them. The bridges rock—they only stand up through force of habit. Damn it all, there's nobody in this stupid republic to keep order. Remember that scoundrel of a station-master at Ukurei? The way he snapped: 'It's none of your business!' They're terribly spoiled here. That's because they don't feel a firm hand over them. When we're settled in Khabarovsk I'll go to the station-master there and give him a piece of my mind."

Matveyev finished his doodling and admired it through narrowed eyes.

He had had time to get used to this. Every day Bezais would go to the window, pick at the putty and curse the railway. He used the strongest words in his vocabulary and wanted to complain to someone. That raised his spirits a little. "Otherwise it will all stay bottled up inside me," he said, "and I'll get ill." Matveyev did not interrupt him—after all, it was better than the violent scene, accompanied by shouts and foot-stamping, that Bezais had put on at Ukurei. The train had stopped there for two days and Bezais had been a pitiful sight. Finally he had run growling to the station and turned the place upside down. He thirsted for blood.

"Calls itself a democratic republic," he yelled as Matveyev dragged him away to the doors. "What do they think it is? The Art Theatre?"

His was a restless nature. He could not sit still and wait for the train to trundle up to Khabarovsk. He was eighteen and youth stirred in his veins like green sap.

At first Matveyev himself had taken part in these outbursts though he had never gone beyond deciding

to argue with the guard. But the days had passed and every morning the dawn shed a pink light over the taiga slumbering under the snow. Snow-clad stations appeared and vanished in a frosty haze. Rugged rocks and red-tinged larches ran by. Sometimes from under the snow at the foot of the embankment twisted rails would protrude, or the ribs of goods wagons or rusty railway engines. The crimson sun rose with monotonous regularity, the stained kettle simmered on the iron stove and Bezais would go to the window and curse the railway. Matveyev had had enough of all that. He was not capable of remaining angry for several days running. So he preferred to sit in silence and to concentrate his thoughts on how fine it would be if spring were suddenly to come and he would no longer have to run for firewood at every stop.

Three weeks had passed since they left Moscow, but to Bezais it seemed like several months. As far as Irkutsk the train had been so crowded that it had been difficult to take one's hand out of one's pocket. They had slept in their seats or on their feet, wincing at the jolts of the train. For days on end the train had stood in sidings. On one run the axle overheated—the whole carriage held its breath and listened to the piteous squeal of the wheels. Everyone was afraid that the carriage would be uncoupled. And one night they were all awakened by a wild and terrible howl—a woman was in labour, lying on the floor of the corridor. They made room for her in the compartment, spread newspapers; the men were asked to avert their eyes. Towards morning the woman gave birth to a boy. Everyone thought up names for him and cursed the wench for her stupidity.

But the worst part of the journey began at Irkutsk. There they had to leave the train and apply to the Gubernia Cheka to have their papers stamped so that they could enter the Far Eastern Republic. Then, howling oaths and imprecations, they entrained in a goods van which was already occupied by a troupe of actors of the Political Department of Nth Division. The actors swore at them all night and all the next day, right up to Verkhneudinsk where they grew exhausted. Matveyev and Bezais tried to snap back at first but after a time they fell silent and sat glum and worried, thinking that, after all, life was a bad joke.

The first to wake up in the morning was the producer. He lowered from his berth a pair of fat legs clad in voluminous trousers and, yawning, scratched the scrub on his cheeks and chin. Then he kicked the comedian, a seedy individual held in the utmost contempt by the rest of the company, and sent him for hot water. The tragedian woke up and went to drink tea, adding sugar from his knapsack. He was an intense, wiry, acrimonious fellow. He got on everyone's nerves, was always picking quarrels, and slapped the face of an old woman who played comic roles, when he could not find his sugar or his herring. Nothing was good enough for him: the van rattled, there was a draught from the doors, no one respected him. Matveyev scrutinized him with curiosity: it amazed him that a man could be such a beast.

Later the whole carriage woke up, coughing and complaining. The stove was lit, tea was brewed, people related their dreams. There were three women in the troupe: two young and one quite old. This old woman was beautiful, with well-marked features and

snow-white hair. She had retained the habit of caring for her appearance from better times, and when the tragedian hit her, her only concern was to prevent his blows falling on her face. The young women were plain and were so approachable that no one even asked their consent.

But at Chita a miracle occurred. A capacious saloon, a converted ordinary carriage, was allotted to them. How it happened they had no idea. At the Party Committee where they received their papers to proceed to Khabarovsk, an excited-looking man in army uniform dashed up to them and pressed them warmly to accompany this saloon to Khabarovsk and turn it over to an armoured train that was waiting there. They graciously consented and hurried to the station in high spirits. The outside of the carriage was decorated like a book for children. There were drawings of workers and peasants, of Negroes, of socialism, and of a big green snake with red eyes. Matveyev and Bezais were astonished. They felt full of self-esteem. It did not fall to everyone's lot to travel in such a carriage.

It was not bad inside either. In the middle of the saloon stood a huge friendly stove, as massive as a house. Up against the left wall leaned a scratched grand piano; some silly chump had written various indecent words in indelible pencil on the keyboard, obviously at the expense of much time and effort. The piano was frightfully old, its red-painted legs wobbled, but somehow it stood up and bore its fate submissively, a fallen aristocrat among the hefty proletarians. On the bare wall hung a poster depicting a carelessly-clad maiden waving a red flag. Bezais em-

bellished her with a beard and moustache, saying that he found it embarrassing to undress in the presence of ladies. At the top end of the carriage there was a stage with all accoutrements: a prompter's box, curtain and a splendid winter forest scene.

They left Chita and at first everything went swimmingly. They lounged about the saloon, surprised to find it so large; they crept into the prompter's box and drew the curtain to and fro. On the evenings they sat beside the hot stove and talked and talked, consoled by their unexpected stroke of luck. Outside the windows a white haze lit by occasional sparks flew past. The wheels beat out each step on their journey into the obscure distance, far beyond Khabarovsk, beyond the dense forest, to the rocky gorges where a beast, on meeting a man, looks him straight in the eyes.

On such evenings the two young men warmed to each other and spoke of things which men are usually silent about, things that lie deep in the soul and are treasured for oneself alone. They had in common one word which bound them to each other almost like brothers. It is a fine, manly word which has few to match it in human speech. It contains the echo of the old years that have passed, years warmed by splendid wrath and by the best blood. It stirs a memory of people clad in Russian peasant shirts and old-fashioned jackets, whose names sounded like oaths—and Bezais felt that the great shadow of these people was falling on his freckled boyish face.

But then their misfortunes started. To begin with, the railway engine lost a piece of its funnel. They took this event bravely: they ran up the train to look at

the damage and spent a long time discussing how it had happened. Then some connecting-rod broke, followed by an accident to a valve, and later the locomotive began to fall to pieces—every day something else broke. This was all very dull and vexing. With a bit of patching the engine moved slowly on. Then it was replaced by another. But then they ran into snow-drifts, delays, track repairs. The route stretched like a piece of elastic: according to the time-table they should have been in Khabarovsk long ago, but the train was still dawdling at unknown little stations, between the mountains and the snow, and it seemed that Khabarovsk did not exist at all, that the line ran endlessly through the frost and mist.

For the first few days they stood at the window admiring the scenery. Their eyes, accustomed to the broad Russian landscape, were shocked by the abundance of rock and forest. Everything here was a definite, clear colour, without half-hues. The sky was deep blue, the colour of corn-flowers, the forest—a succulent green against the brown rock. They tried to take in everything and, their faces pressed to the glass, marvelled at every detail.

In this way the first days passed, but then life became so tedious that their jaws went out of joint with yawning and their shoulders began to ache insufferably. There was absolutely nothing to do. They had examined the saloon, the piano, the stage in the minutest detail. The day passed in stupefying idleness and ended senselessly in deep twilight when there remained nothing to do but sleep. Bezais lost his temper and thumped the keyboard until he was utterly exhausted. Everything around them was familiar; the

routine was so endlessly repetitious that it irritated them beyond words. By the end of the first week Matveyev felt he could not look out of the window any longer.

"You know, old man," he said once, "I've already counted a hundred and one mountains with a single pine on them and I'm fed to the teeth with them. You can't turn your head without bumping up against natural scenery of some sort. I need very little nature: I can stand a few flowers or a butterfly, but here there's God knows how much."

That was a stab in the back. But Bezais hung on for a few more days. Finally he too had had enough and gave up.

"I'm going to concentrate on sleeping as much as I can," said Matveyev.

Immediately after dinner he would go to the stove, stretch out on his greatcoat and lie there for several hours, placing his tobacco, paper and matches beside him to economize movement.

"It's silly to stand when you can sit," he said, "but it's even sillier to sit when you can lie down."

Then he grew so addicted to this practice that he lay on his back nearly all day. Bezais tried in vain to emulate him.

That was the beginning of the demoralization which at first made them feel ashamed of themselves and think up feeble excuses. They became so lazy that they reached a stage when they did not want to wash or dress or even think—when every movement was torture. For several days Bezais contemplated extracting from the door the nail on which he had torn first

his left, then his right sleeve, but he could not make up his mind to do it and the nail stayed where it was.

The huge stove that they had to light every morning filled them with particular disgust. This stove was a curse, for it required constant attention. Early in the morning the firewood had to be splintered and laid in the stove and then for about half an hour they had to crawl round it on all fours puffing at the flames. Contrary to all the rules, the smoke began by coming downwards instead of up and made them cough suffocatingly. When the wood flared up the snow which had accumulated in the chimney during the night began to melt and put out the fire. They would have to start all over again. The stove might have been put there specially to punish them and they loathed it from the bottom of their hearts. One morning they revolted and did not light it, but they had to surrender after dinner when a thin film of ice formed on the water in the pot.

Early in the morning Matveyev would gingerly poke his tousled head out from under the blanket and start getting up. He did this in stages: first he tore his head from the floor, then his arms, his back and so on. If nothing hampered him he was on his feet within half an hour.

Their faces crumpled with suffering, the two young men would light the stove and drink strong brick-tea. This raised their spirits a little. Cursing the railway, Bezais, still sleepy, would aim for the piano and totter to it, swaying to the jolts of the carriage. The scratched old piano emitted the same hoarse, wheezy bass note from each of its disgraced keys. Under Be-

zais's hands it howled and whined in such natural despair that Matveyev went practically out of his wits.

"Stop it, you fool," he would shout at Bezais, "as if you could play a note anyway. What have you got against the piano? Leave it alone. If you don't, I'll be up and have done with you."

"I'd like to see you do that," Bezais replied without turning, for he knew that no power in the world could get Matveyev to his feet. "If you don't like it, go and smoke on the platform outside. I'm not going to leave this piano till I've smashed it."

This went on every day until the piano finally gave up the ghost. Bezais composed a formless, hysterical, and shockingly ugly tune which they called a Dead March. It had neither beginning nor end and its disconnected notes burst out and fell like blows on the head. Having achieved his aim Bezais abandoned the piano. He had absolutely no idea what to do next.

Tired of lying on his back, Matveyev pulled out a notebook which had been presented to him by the political department of the division and jotted down his impressions of the journey. This was no easy thing to do, for the simple reason that he had no impressions. He rocked to and fro, his arms clasping his knees, sucked the end of his pencil and narrowed his eyes. Finally he heaved a deep sigh and wrote:

"Outside the window a beautiful panorama of wild and original natural scenery is unfolding. Mighty flora and fauna..."

His natural honesty prevailed and, striking out the word "fauna," he went on:

"...involuntarily inspires a thirst for action and struggle. Everything is going splendidly...."

Hearing Bezais's footsteps creeping up behind him, he hurriedly added:

"... if you don't count that booby Bezais who is looking over my shoulder and blowing into my left ear, certain that I haven't noticed him...."

"Wow!" Bezais yelled in his ear.

Matveyev sprang to his feet, made a grab for Bezais's neck and tried to throw him down. They both fell to the floor and, grappling hard, rolled the length of the saloon in a few minutes. A rain of pencils, cartridges and coins streamed from their pockets. When they had had enough they got up and went and sat on their beds.

"If I'd only managed to get a good grip on your neck," said Bezais, breathing hard, "I'd have shown you something. You'd have learned what a backheel throw is and how to grip a man's sleeve. I should have taken a firmer grip on you right away, round your neck, and then you wouldn't have been able to move a finger."

"Why didn't you do it, then? Did you expect me to stick my neck under your arm-pit? Didn't you?"

"I'll get a hold of you the next time, you'll see, and then you'll know who's the stronger," retorted Bezais, as he crawled about the floor searching for the contents of his pockets.

Meanwhile the train hurtled on at the speed customary in 1921, faltering at the rail junctions, slowing down at wooden bridges which creaked under its weight. Rocks glittering with ice, the cedars of the

taiga the pale-blue mountain peaks flew past. Behind the last carriage whirled a light cloud of prickly dry snow.

ALL MEN DREAM

FOR BEZAIS life was simple. He believed there would be a world revolution, if not tomorrow, then certainly the day after tomorrow. He did not torment himself with questions, he did not keep a diary. And when someone told him in the club that the merchant Smirnov had been shot during the night somewhere across the river, all he said was: "Well, it had to be"—because he could think of no other use for merchants.

He found everything that went on around him quite normal. Bread queues, the typhus epidemic, armed patrols on the streets at night—these neither shocked nor alarmed him. They were as normal as day or night. For him the days before the Revolution were mythical—they belonged to the Old Testament—and he thought of Tsar Nicholas as he did of Nebuchadnezzar. All kinds of things had happened in the old days that were no concern of his. All he remembered of the past was the policeman who stood outside the Volga-Kama Bank and the now-discarded letter *Yat* with which he had wrestled at school.

From God—that homely, bearded God with whom he had lived for fourteen years—he had parted lightly, without any spiritual pangs. There had been no special break, nothing out of the ordinary had happened; he had simply decided that God did not exist.

"He's not here," he said, as he would have spoken of someone who had left the room.

As a boy it had been his lot to see some terrible things. One night Cossacks broke into the town and before dawn they had killed three hundred people. When he went out in the morning with the water-buckets he saw the bodies dangling limply from the telegraph poles—a sure sign that there had been a change of power in the town. When the Whites left, the corpses were borne to the fire-station yard and laid on the ground in rows. Together with the others Bezais volunteered to put them, two at a time, in big coffins and nail down the lids. At first it upset him terribly to handle the corpses, but later he got used to it.

"It's nothing special," he told himself.

The Reds killed the Whites and the Whites killed the Reds. It was all extraordinarily simple. People went fishing and were brought back from the river dead and buried with musical honours in the square. The town was held by the Reds and the monastery woods by the Greens, while in the ravines across the river lived quite unknown bands. Nobody knew what *they* were up to. They blew up trains, stole washing from the clothes lines, fought everybody and profiteered madly in salt. The authorities came and went, leaving edicts and appeals on the fences; street names were changed, triumphal arches erected. The very roots of life were laid bare and life itself became surprisingly simple. Only the basic, most essential phrases meant anything.

Once Bezais started to read Dostoyevsky's *Crime*

and Punishment. He was quite astonished when he reached the end.

"Good heavens," he said. "So much palaver because of one old woman."

When Bezais found his place in life he walked about for days like a man intoxicated. He ached with a desire to sacrifice his life for the Revolution and looked everywhere for an opportunity to get himself involved in it—so great and unbearable was the fire that burned in his heart. From those days he retained his passion for flags, demonstrations and solemn funerals. Their violent pomp provided an outlet for his moods.

At fifteen he made his first speech at a meeting in the People's Club. Afterwards he always recalled that occasion with shame and horror. Trembling in every limb, feeling ready to die, he climbed on to the platform and at once forgot every word he had ever learned. The public put up with his shameful silence for several minutes but then someone in the balcony laughed mercilessly. With a desperate effort he drew a deep breath and, frowning bestially, said something—but what it was he could never remember.

Unnoticed by himself or others Bezais began to attract attention. He gained a reputation in the town; heads were turned when he crossed the hall at meetings; the Party Committee unanimously conferred on him the authority to "confiscate the property of persons who had fled with the whiteguard bands," and he went about the town with a rubber stamp and a seal in his pocket. Every day brought him new work. He escorted detainees from the camps to the special military tribunal, sawed wood in the monastery forest, travelled around the district with a mandate from the

People's Commissariat of Education to collect landlords' libraries and brought back to town cartloads of old books with gilt edges and faded velvet bindings stamped with family crests, and containing book-plates—books that had belonged to Freemasons or followers of Voltaire. He was still little more than a boy and he greeted every new year in his life as a long-awaited, long-promised gift—but in those days these lads with freckled, prematurely aged faces had much to do.

And then there was the front—the Polish front—and that was a glorious time when towns fell before their marching feet and the land lay ahead in one great road to Warsaw. And even later on, when the front was broken by a brrrr of cross-fire from machine-guns at the walls of Warsaw, even then Bezais, despite the bitterness of defeat, continued to carry that triumphant feeling in his heart.

He and Matveyev had met in Moscow. Together they received their travel documents, together they took their places in the overcrowded carriage, and together they were turned out of the exhausted train at Chita into a freezing, alien land. They fixed themselves up in an abandoned room, full of dust and cobwebs, wandered about the town, slept on tables, talked about a thousand and one topics, and hurled their boots at the rats.

Oh, that was a happy place, the Far Eastern Republic! It was young and had not yet accumulated that store of chronology, names, monuments and corpses that give to a state the stony majesty of age. Old residents remembered its military leaders and ministers as little boys sailing paper boats in puddles; they

remembered the times when the Parliament building in which laws were now promulgated used to be a hotel where waiters ran about with napkins over their arms. The Republic had been founded but yesterday and the dark blue and red of its flag shone as brightly as paint on a new toy.

"It's not original," pronounced Bezais when he had inspected the Republic from head to foot.

He felt like a foreigner there and was proud of his motherland.

The capital of the Republic—Chita—lay buried in sand; there was dust in the streets in December when the mercury stood at -40°C . This somehow created an impression of a lack of order in the place. A dense frosty haze hung over the town; on the horizon distant sand dunes showed pale blue. The various factions raised uproar in the Parliament, resolutions were tabled, voted upon, the chairman called for order. In the diplomatic box sat a Chinese with a bow tie who listened politely with a smile frozen on his face. Over the chairman hung a coat of arms that was almost Soviet except that instead of a hammer and sickle it had an anchor and a miner's hack. The flag was red but there was a blue square in one corner. The army wore the five-pointed star but half of it was blue and half of it red. The whole Republic was like that, half and half. Its citizens adopted a friendly attitude towards it, mixed with a touch of good-tempered derision, but no one took it seriously. And when war broke out the population held meetings to decide whether to go to the front to defend the Republic or whether to stay at home and fight the Whites each in his own way, in his own home, village or town.

That year the frost was very hard. Birds froze in the taiga, in the rivers the ice broke hollowly with angular blue cracks. Fingers stuck to rifle-butts; the air was dry and strong and burned the throat like raw spirit; even the stones felt cold. There were more casualties from frost-bite than from wounds; in the hospital trains the surgeons amputated limbs seared black by the frost.

The trains ran eastward, through Transbaikalia and the Amur, towards the yellow shores of the Pacific. There lay another Republic, a front that seethed; there machine-guns stuttered and soldiers froze in ice-clad trenches. The trains carried the People's Army dressed in shaggy hats and sheepskins—sturdy young fellows with locks of hair curling on their brows. At headquarters red pencils drew a semicircular front on large-scale maps: the Whites skirted Khabarovsk on three sides. The Republic was in a sorry plight—the whole of the Maritime Region had fallen to the enemy, the Japanese were planning something, and there were some ugly rumours about the army. At headquarters weary men rushed about. The telephone receiver shrieked news of casualties, of the fall of villages and stations; it demanded men and rifles, it wheezed and swore by all the saints.

The Whites advanced in blind desperation. When men are at their last tether—the last cartridges, the last days of their lives—they act pitilessly and thoughtlessly, and feel death just behind them, at their heels. Then a man fears nothing, neither God nor bullet or corpse. The army wore a motley uniform, stained with the dust of many roads. There were English tunics and khaki greatcoats with the lion on the but-

tons; there were French helmets and Czech caps and Russian fur hats. The men who wore them were doomed, and their shoulder-straps lay on them like a curse. With Kolchak they had retreated from Ufa to Irkutsk, across the whole of Siberia, through frost and typhus; they had come with Semyonov over the pale-blue hills of Transbaikalia; they had amused themselves with Ungern in slant-eyed Mongolia. They could go no further—this was their last campaign. The game was up.

A week after their arrival in Chita Matveyev and Bezais were called to the Party Committee by a man of responsibility—a Lett with an unpronounceable name—who spoke to them for about an hour as he kept taking out of blue folders some secret and highly important papers. On a big map he marked in pencil a number of stations, impassable marshes, secret bases, regiments under arms; under their eyes the map began to palpitate with a dimly perceived life.

The firing line had come quite close to Khabarovsk where the front lay in an uneven curve, taking in several outlying railway stations and villages. Khabarovsk itself was still held by the Reds and it had been decided to hang on at all costs.

Across the lines nameless partisan detachments were on the move. There in the taiga, at the partisans' base, a headquarters had been set up; the Regional Party Committee functioned, and in the towns, in the enemy's rear, clandestine organizations worked. Only occasionally did a little news get through from over there where people worked cut off by two firing lines; even the way through to them was secret. Matveyev and Bezais would have to go to Khabarovsk first and

there they would be told their route, provided with guides and infiltrated to the other side.

They left the office looking somewhat pale; they were shocked by the vast scale of the work. Bezais began to see himself in something of a new light. He felt rather hurt that the Lett had addressed himself mainly to Matveyev, but that trivial feeling paled before the deep, exciting sense of joy he was experiencing. This was something bigger than "the confiscation of the property of the bourgeoisie who had fled with the whiteguard bands," bigger even than the Polish front.

It was going to be a difficult business, getting over there, across the lines, but somehow he did not give that a thought. As he lay on the table at night he stared into the darkness and with sad resolve imagined himself facing a firing squad. He would rather be skinned alive than reveal the secret information he had not yet been entrusted with; he asked only one favour—to be allowed to give the order to fire himself. He saw their rifles, the officer's raised sword, he heard the deafening salvo, felt himself falling, but there his imagination stopped short—he did not believe in his own death. He thought of his work, of the towns, of the partisan detachments, and, mingled with all that, there rose a vague thought of the mysterious woman, glittering with beauty, whom he had been waiting for so long. And in the complexity of his thoughts he lost himself and fell asleep, delighted and exhausted.

For a whole week they loafed about Chita waiting for their last day. All kinds of currency were in circulation in the Republic—silver coins bearing the effigy

of the snub-nosed tsar, Japanese yen, Chinese yuans—and everything was absurdly cheap. Once they were each given five rubles to spend and they left their lodgings determined to have a good meal. Their mouths watered at the thought of tender sausages, cheese, cocoa and other good things.

“I want lobster,” declared Bezais with sudden verve. In his view lobster was a special delicacy.

At the first street corner they met a Chinese peanut vendor. They bought two pounds of nuts and attacked them with a bestial gleam in their eyes. They went on eating until the bag was empty and for several days afterwards could not stand even the thought of peanuts.

It was midnight when they buckled the last strap on their bags. Two boring hours had to be filled in somehow before the train left. With meticulous care Matveyev unfolded his papers and then folded them up again. Then he pulled out a thick wad of notes—several thousand Japanese yen which he had to hand over personally to the Maritime Region Party Committee. He kept this money with the greatest care: never before had he had so large a sum in his hands and it worried him. Once he thought he had lost it and for ten minutes he was in a state of frenzy until he found the wad in the lining.

Bezais swung on his hands between two tables. He was silent. The rats were cautiously gnawing in the cupboard. Many things awaited the two young men—good things, bad things. In his mind's eye Bezais took in the boundless expanse of taiga sleeping under the snow.

The thought of these vast spaces and of their frozen stillness sent a shiver down his back. He stole a glance at Matveyev.

"He said it wasn't my business," said Matveyev, resuming an endless story about how he once drowned, which he had been telling since they left Irkutsk. Twenty times he had begun the story but something had always interrupted him and now he was determined to get it told once and for all. "All the same, I swallowed it and straight away the water began to pour out of me. Something terrible, it was. I still don't know what it was. Something like ammonia. Then I was led through the town and all the boys ran after me. At home Father gave me such hell that I was sorry I didn't drown properly."

Bezais clambered on to a table and rocked the lamp-shade with his forehead. He was bursting with impatience. It was difficult to talk about things like bravery, danger and death. The phrases came out so stilted and insincere that they provided no relief to a heart filled to the brim with emotion.

"There's no end to your story, is there, Matveyev?" he asked. "How many times did you drown? Come on, tell me, don't make a secret of it."

"Twice. The second time was in the sea, near Batum. Am I boring you?"

"No, of course not. It's frightfully interesting. But I'm thinking of something quite different. What do you think about the journey?"

"Why, nothing in particular. Why should I think about it?"

"Oh, I was just wondering."

"Well, what do you think about it?"

"Me? Oh, nothing in particular."

They looked hard at each other.

"But still."

Bezais clasped his hands behind his head.

"Listen, old man," he said pensively and a little shyly. "Maybe a thing like this can happen only once in your life. Everything breaks in two. There was I working at a quiet job. First I went out collecting all kinds of things left behind by the people who ran away with the White bands—bourgeois sofas, family albums and bicycles. Then I went off to take Warsaw from the hands of the wretched szlachta. But everyone was doing that. Now, though.... I haven't got quite used to my new situation. It's strange. It's just like something in some novel and I wish I could take a look at the chapter headings. Don't you have a feeling of something spinning round inside you?"

"All work is good," said Matveyev judiciously.

"Nonsense."

"What d'you mean?"

"You're just pretending to be thick-skinned. In fact, you're a bit worried too."

"I know what's the matter with you. There aren't enough war-cries and military music for your taste."

"Perhaps you're right."

Matveyev rose to his feet and started lacing his boots.

"I'm a hopelessly normal fellow," he said complacently, repeating someone else's words. "The main thing I worry about is to have a pair of woollen socks. But you're a dreamer."

Bezais knew this naïve weakness of Matveyev's: to consider himself a man of experience, judgement and

common sense. Everyone pictures himself some way or another.

"My good fellow, all people dream. When a man stops dreaming it means he's ill and needs treatment. Marx, I suppose, was cleverer than you, and I'm certain he dreamed, dreamed about socialism and a good brawl. I expect that from time to time he laid aside his *Capital* and said to Engels: 'You know, old man, it's going to be marvellous!'"

But Matveyev was stubborn.

"Get dressed," he said. "Where did you put that tin of cocoa?"

THE NOTEBOOK

MATVEYEV woke up in an excellent mood. Outside the sun shone brightly, striking brilliant sparks from the snow. Milk-white mountain peaks stood out in soft relief against the dark-blue enamel-like sky. It was hard to believe that out there the temperature was -40°C. , that water poured from a mug would reach the ground as tinkling icicles.

Matveyev opened one eye, then opened the other, only to shut them again. He did not feel like getting up.

He recalled that Bezais had woken him during the night for some ridiculous reason. Vaguely he had heard Bezais ask him how to multiply two hundred and forty by thirty two. Bezais had kept quiet for some ten minutes but then he had disturbed him again and started telling him that he, Matveyev, was a slacker and a loafer and that it was his turn to light the

stove because two days ago he, Bezais, had washed the glasses out of turn. They had a complicated schedule for lighting the stove and were always getting into a muddle over it. Then Matveyev had gone to sleep again and remembered nothing more.

He loved to sleep, as he loved to eat and to work. He was healthy and knew how to extract a lot of pleasure from everything he did. In the ranks he was always on the right flank and when furniture had to be shifted or some rowdy flung out of the club people always sent for Matveyev. He looked on the world with the calm smile of a man who can lift three poods with one hand.

He had one of those broad, strong-featured faces which never attract attention. For some time a beard had been sprouting on it—separate long hairs growing in all directions, each of them curling like a corkscrew. Then he took a pair of scissors and cut his beard down to the skin.

He opened his eyes again and noticed Bezais sitting with his back to him on a packing-case. Bezais was reading something. Matveyev stretched, ran his eyes absent-mindedly over the posters on the walls of the saloon which was flooded with sunlight. The stove roared and pleasant flames burst out of its half-open doors. Matveyev's eyes fell on Bezais again and froze. He clearly saw that Bezais was engrossed in his, Matveyev's, notebook—an oilcloth-bound book with clasps, and an inscription in one corner: "To Comrade Matveyev from the Political Department of Nth Division."

At first he was so shocked that he could not move. Then with one bound he sprang from the floor.

rushed at Bezais and kicked the packing-case from under him. Bezais fell to the floor. Matveyev stooped and tore the book from his hand. He took a rapid glance at it and saw that all was lost. He should have woken up earlier.

Breathing heavily, Bezais got up.

"I call that a foul thing to do, attacking a man from behind," he said, rubbing the nape of his neck.

"You swine!"

"You're a swine yourself. Have you gone mad?"

"Shut up!"

"Shut up yourself!"

Matveyev sought in vain for something to say. He could hardly restrain himself from falling upon Bezais again. They stood eyeing each other in silence. Bezais thrust his chest forward.

"May I inquire, Comrade Matveyev," he said with exaggerated politeness, "what is the reason for your behaviour? Please excuse my curiosity but you've bruised my head."

Matveyev went on searching for words but found nothing to say.

"You're a fool of a cur," he said finally with emphasis.

He slipped the notebook into his pocket, went to the other packing-case and sat down. Bezais eyed him angrily.

"Don't let that happen again," said Matveyev.

"What?"

"What you've just done. Keep your nose out of my business. That's not the way Communists behave. It's dishonourable to read someone else's letters or note-

books. Get yourself a diary and read it as much as you like."

"As if I was interested in your trash. I had to make an effort to read it, all that awful nonsense about flowers. By the way, why do you write 'incidantally.' D'you think it looks nicer that way?"

"I write it the way I want."

"All right. And drop all that talk about Communists. 'Dishonourable.' That morality stinks. There's nothing a Communist ought to hide from his comrade. He's a social worker, and everything's above-board. But when some Philistine falls in love he becomes demoralized and keeps a diary ... yes ... and jumps on people ... in short, he makes an ass of himself."

Matveyev glowered at him.

"Look out, I'm coming for you," he said, licking his lips in anticipation of a scrap. "You'd better keep your trap shut."

"Is she pretty?"

"Shut up."

By now Matveyev was thoroughly offended. It was impossible to argue because Bezais had an extraordinary gift for seeing the funny side of everything and could disarm anyone in an argument. Matveyev could never find the quick, stinging reply in time. And now he was rubbing his hands and thinking up a retort.

Rattling impatiently, the train ran past some misty mountains. It jolted as it ran over points and each jerk evoked a long humming sound in the piano. Bezais felt like turning his hand to something but chancing to touch the bruise on his head he felt a sharp pain.

"You swine," he whispered.

He cleared his throat and sat down opposite Matveyev.

"All the same, you have a difficult nature," he began, delighted at the prospect of giving the other a dressing down. "As a man I feel sorry to think what will happen to her, to that lovely, tender flower which is reaching so innocently to the light, to love. You've got to handle flowers a special way, chum. You need to know how. Give a man like you a flower to handle and God knows what'll be left of it."

Matveyev maintained a manly silence and stared at a cigarette-end on the floor.

"At present you're in love," Bezais continued, "and I understand how you feel. A man in love is bound to be somewhat exalted, but you, it seems to me, are taking it all much too seriously. Throwing a fellow on to his head—that's a new fashion all right. If you'd kissed a lock of her hair or gazed at the moon or cried a bit at night I wouldn't have said a word. Go ahead! But to crack people's skulls, that doesn't do anybody any good. Are you going to behave that way every day, may I ask? I have the feeling that that way of living is going to be bad for my health and that I'll pine away before we reach Khabarovsk. And when my mother comes to you and stretches out her parched hands and asks you in a quavering voice who is going to support her in her old age—what will you have to say, you monster?"

"I'll give her everything that's left of you."

Matveyev picked up the kettle, filled it with water and placed it on the stove. Come what may, one always had to have breakfast. He cut some bread, un-

wrapped some ham, took out some hard-boiled eggs and arranged everything on a packing-case. Then, closely watched by Bezais, he washed two glasses, sat down and began his breakfast. Bezais thought for a moment, then he too sat down.

Breakfast passed in silence. They pretended not to notice each other. All this began to get on Bezais's nerves.

After breakfast Bezais went over to the window and absent-mindedly watched the scenery running past. The rock jutted everywhere—a fleshy red in places, brown sometimes, streaked with veins, rust-coloured, and often gashed with deep fissures. The side of the mountain was precipitous and the rock strata lay like bared muscles. In the hollows rose huge trees, their trunks tousled with grey moss, their reddish bark streaked with silver patches of rime. Steep cascades of ice ran down from the mountains and from their surface the sun was rejected with unbearable brilliance. Everything was on an enormous scale, unusual and quite overpowering.

Bezais felt out of sorts. He did not blame himself—it was far worse to attack a man from behind, when he was off his guard, than what he had done. It was the first time in his life that he had encountered such delicate matters as reading someone else's notebook, but he had dismissed them from his mind before he opened it. He had come across the notebook and had opened it with an easy conscience, as if it had been his own. But he was a man who could not be angry on a full belly and after breakfast he always felt a flood of good nature.

Turning from the window he went to beat out his endless tune on the piano. Then he placed a match-box on the floor, drew his knife and started throwing it in an attempt to pin the box to the floor. At other times the knife-throwing had served very well to kill time but now it was more like hard work than distraction.

Suddenly the train stopped. A numbed soldier came in and asked them to help load firewood for the locomotive. They put on their coats in silence and went out. A chain of men was formed between the locomotive and the wood pile and the logs went swiftly from hand to hand. Bezais and Matveyev joined the chain and standing knee-deep in snow set to work. The wind cut the skin like a knife. It took an hour to load the tender. Everybody dashed back to the train.

Matveyev and Bezais returned to their carriage weary and frozen. They stoked up the stove, squatted close to the flames and stretched out their hands to the warmth. There was so little room near the stove-door that they sat almost shoulder to shoulder.

"I'm dog-tired," said Bezais uncertainly.

"So am I," said Matveyev hurriedly. "Such weather's enough to kill you."

"I didn't hit your head very hard, did I, this morning?" Matveyev said half an hour later.

"No, not very," answered Bezais.

They passed the rest of the day in silence, but in the evening, as they sat beside the glowing stove, Matveyev told all—from the very beginning. It was a long story, for he did not omit a single detail and explained every move he had made. He was afraid that Bezais would miss the main point and consider him an ass. Everything was of the highest importance—

every crunching step on the snow, each silent frosty night, the feeble pressure of her delicate fingers when they shook hands.

At the club in Chita, when there was absolutely nothing to do, someone had slipped a ticket for a students' social into Matveyev's hand. Yawning, he dressed up, peering over his shoulder to see how his jacket fitted in the back, and tried to persuade Bezais to go instead of him, so that the ticket would not be wasted. Bezais didn't want to go.

In the big hall, hung with pine garlands and pennants, people moved about aimlessly. Stewards with broad red armlets dashed about in panic. The lights were lowered, then went on again, a face, heavily made up, appeared through the curtains and asked for a chair to be handed up on to the stage. The chair floated over people's heads. The lights were lowered again and the performance began.

A tall, heavily made-up student slouched up to the footlights and explained in a long monologue that he was corrupted by his environment. At this point Matveyev felt he wanted to smoke and remembered that he had left his cigarettes in his overcoat pocket. He went out for them and strolled into the smoking-room, but when he returned to the hall he found his seat occupied. Then he went into the reading-room, found a seat in a corner and began to read the newspapers. It was there that he met her and afterwards, every time he recalled that first meeting, he remembered her severe profile against the posters and the notice: "Silence, please."

His line of approach to women was simple and unvaried. He had tried it before and if it led to nothing

he blamed the circumstances. In his opinion, women did not find ordinary, uncomplicated men attractive. To please them a man had to be a little enigmatic.

Now, there was nothing enigmatic about him—he was too healthy for that. But when he was after a girl he tried to be, if not exactly enigmatic, then at least a little strange. “No,” he said, “I don’t like flowers. They look silly. Music? I don’t like music either.”

But she spoiled his game at once.

“You’re a bear,” she said as they walked arm in arm into the corridor. “Look, you’ve trodden on my foot once more.”

“I’m not used to women’s company,” he said.

“How is that?”

“Oh, somehow I haven’t had the chance.”

“Maybe they don’t like yours.”

“No, I don’t care for it myself.”

She stole a quick glance at him.

“How monotonous. All men say the same thing. Semyonov even says he can’t look at a woman without feeling bored.”

“Who is Semyonov?”

“Oh, just someone. He’s got fair hair. You don’t know him. He’s a cheap fellow. He’s got wet lips.”

Matveyev slowed down.

“How do you know what kind of lips he’s got?”

She tossed her head.

“What’s that got to do with you? He tried to kiss me.”

“What did you do?”

“Slapped his face.”

Matveyev told Bezais that her best features were her eyes: they were dark, with long lashes.

"They made my head go round," he explained.

Through the half-open door the light fell obliquely on her face. Her hair was dark, cut so short that all her neck was revealed. Everything about her pleased him—her olive complexion, her small vivid mouth, her slim figure.

They took a few more steps.

"Did you slap his cheek?" Matveyev asked mechanically.

"No, his forehead. He managed to turn his head. But aren't you inquisitive?"

"That's the last thing you can say of me. Why, I haven't even asked you what you're doing here in Chita."

"I'm studying at the college here and I work too in the women's department of the Second Chita workshops. But I'm from Khabarovsk and I'm going back there soon. My mother lives there."

"I see," he said reflectively. "When are you leaving?"

"The day after tomorrow."

"I suppose you could go a bit later? In a week, say?"

"No, I can't."

They walked up and down the corridor under the dusty electric light and chatted. She clung to his arm, smoked and laughed at the top of her voice. People turned to look at them and smiled. Matveyev felt a trifle foolish.

"I don't care," she said. "Let them stare."

"I made a terrible row at the District Party Committee," she said a little later, "I didn't want the job they sent me to. I don't like bothering with women,

it's awful. They're always talking about their husbands or their children or their diseases—I get fed up with it. Especially their chatter about children. Whenever three or four of them get together they start talking about confinements and pregnancies and breast-feeding. You just can't get them off it. It bores me to death. I don't like children, do you?"

Somehow he had never asked himself whether he liked children or not. But he was fairly ready to tickle them under the chin or toss them into the air if they did not cry.

"They come naturally," he said vaguely, "like rain or snow. You can't do anything about that."

"Oh yes, you can," she said with a laugh.

"But I've heard that women like having children. I even suspect I'd be fond of my own child—a chubby, pink little wretch in short pants. All the same, I've got on all right without one so far."

"Oh, I expect you'd like to have one. You wouldn't have to carry it for nine months and breast-feed it."

"I haven't got breasts," said Matveyev playfully.

"You poor dear. But it isn't only a question of nursing. A baby means a family, and a family is a tie."

"Your fingers are hot," he said. "Very hot. Why's that?"

Inside the hall people were applauding and shifting their chairs. An actor stepped on to the stage. He wore a floppy smock with a loose tie. In a stern voice he read a poem about the laughter that conceals tears and castigates injustice. After that he sang comic couplets on local themes:

*In Spain the people are Spaniards
But here it's just the opposite....*

Matveyev went home that night feeling quite unnerved, full of a vague happiness, his head crammed with new words. He found Bezais up, sitting in the corner with a stick in his hand near a rat hole. He hushed Matveyev to silence. On the chair lay a big rat with a hairy guileless face and a dangling naked tail. Clouds of tobacco smoke hung in the air.

"You've scared them," said Bezais as he got up. "Stamping your feet like that. I killed this one but the other got away. It had a devilishly strong body. I slashed it on the head so hard that it spun round. But then it got up and ran home to mummy and daddy. I wonder how they get through the stone floor. Well, how are you feeling?"

"I'm all right," said Matveyev with a shy giggle. "Nothing special."

A little later he asked:

"Are you fond of children, Bezais?"

"What are you getting at?" Bezais said suspiciously. "Are you going to tell me a new joke?"

"Oh no. It's just occurred to me that children are an unavoidable evil."

Bezais's high spirits jarred that night. Matveyev lay on his table and did not utter another word. In his mind's eye he could clearly see her face, her eyes turned up to him, her smiling lips—so had she looked at him when they parted at the hostel door.

He went to see her the next evening. The room she shared with two other girls was cold and cheerless. The floor was unswept, the place stank of tobacco, old

Marx looked down sternly from the wall, there were unwashed dishes among the papers on the window-sill. All three girls were dressed alike, in dark skirts and blouses with pockets, and that imparted to the whole room an unlived-in, barracks-like appearance. One of the girls who had curly hair and wore pince-nez on her button of a nose lay on a bed with a young man. They were sharing a book. Smoke poured from an ugly low stove with a rusty pipe that ran to the ventilation pane.

Outside, the street was bathed in faint starlight. They walked side by side, their fingers tightly locked. For some reason Matveyev suddenly began to talk about his childhood, of the first spanking he had got and how sobbing he had been thrown on to a heap of shavings in the corner; of the way his father used to come home drunk on pay-day, stand in the middle of the room and announce proudly:

"One minute interval. Tap, tap, move those feet."

Then he would spit on the floor in a gay contemptuous manner.

Then Matveyev told her how the drunks in the shop had filled him up with liquor and flung him one evening into the street, and how the dogs had licked his face and hands. But he broke off suddenly. Why should he tell her all that, he asked himself. Is it because he wanted her to feel sorry for him?

They walked on a little in silence.

"Are your parents alive?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I've only got my mother. My father died. But I've never let her impose on me. I'd like to see her trying to wallop me.

“What would you have done?”

“Why, I don’t know. Anyway, she wouldn’t have dared. Mother’s a bit afraid of me. I’ve never shown much tenderness to her. It’s better to be frank with them, you know. I said this to her: ‘Mother, you’re binding me hand and foot.’ That was when she started complaining about my coming home at one in the morning. ‘I’ll walk out on you: you don’t understand my needs. I’ve got work, I have a new environment, and I’ll come home whenever I like.’ Of course, that made her cry. ‘I’m your mother,’ she said. ‘I brought you into the world.’ The row lasted for days. ‘Mother,’ I told her, ‘I didn’t ask you to bring me into the world, did I? That was your and Father’s doing. What had I to do with it?’ That night I didn’t come home at all, I slept at the club. Next day she was as meek as a lamb.”

“I see. And how does she behave now?”

“Oh, I don’t take any notice of her.”

Matveyev did not altogether like this talk. Parents were his weak spot. Every time he went home to the low-ceilinged rooms with the poplars and the cherry-trees at the windows he felt somewhat ashamed and sad. His father—quite grey now—walked with a shuffle and his mother’s legs had become swollen. When one’s life is behind one and old age looks in with its faded eyes, what is there left but to be proud of one’s son? His family made him the object of the cult of adoration and he found it burdensome. Every time he addressed a meeting he caught sight of his father in his baggy Sunday suit and of his mother in a flowered shawl. They looked funny sitting there so solemnly, bursting with pride in their phenomenally

clever son. Their life⁸ dragged along in twilight, in unheated rooms, and ration cards for kerosene and bread and sweets haunted them like tireless ghosts. His father still had his dog's job at the workshops, a job that squeezed a man like wet linen. The thought of their son helped them to live. Matveyev knew that his mother collected the rough notes of his speeches and that in the evening over carrot tea she spent hours reading to his father about the system of club education or work with youth of pre-military age. He could give them nothing, all his time and thoughts were taken up by his work; and when he met the old people he always felt embarrassed and conscience-stricken.

He changed the subject.

"Is the weather as cold in Khabarovsk as it is here?"

"No, it's warmer. But we have wind and fogs. It's bad in autumn. The fog is so thick that you can't see a thing. I feel the cold terribly here. Why, my fingers are as cold as ice now."

"I'll warm them for you," said Matveyev decisively.

He pressed her hands to his lips and warmed them with his breath. She did not withdraw them. He stooped swiftly and kissed her cold lips.

She uttered a faint cry.

"You can slap my face," he said, breathing heavily. "I shan't duck."

("I don't know how it happened," he told Bezais. "It was like someone was pushing me on.")

She did not speak as she waited for him to kiss her again. But his courage failed him. He shifted his weight from foot to foot.

"Was that nice?" she asked.

"Not bad," he said, timid and hesitant. "Not at all bad. I'd like to do it again."

She was not afraid of him, she was not angry with him; her eyes thrilled with curiosity and laughter.

"You're going to tell me you love me, aren't you?"

"I am," he said. "I love you very much—more than anything in the world. You're more important to me than anything on earth . . ."

But he was always a bit of a pedant.

"... except the Party," he added conscientiously. She began to laugh.

"I don't believe that. It's never like that. You can't fall in love at first sight, and if you do, it's something to be avoided. The main things in life are, first, work, then food, then rest, and then love. You can't live without the first three but I can get along without your kisses."

"I can't, though."

"But you'd never even seen me before last night. How did you get along before that?"

"That's not important. If I'd seen you the day before yesterday I'd have fallen in love with you."

"Is that the truth?"

"Word of honour."

The door swung open. A group of girls came out laughing and talking to each other. They came down from the porch and walked off, casting glances over their shoulders at Matveyev.

"Listen," he said, bending over her. "I'll not waste any time. Let's finish with this. In a week's time I'm going to Khabarovsk, and from there I'm going south, to the Maritime Region. Let's go together."

She looked at him, and he saw the starlight in her eyes.

"Let's go, my dear. I'll be honest with you—of course I'll go without you too. But I'll be very happy if you consent. Perhaps it's not the most important thing, but it's very important for me all the same."

He grasped her shoulders and shook her so hard that her head fell back. She was silent. Then he drew her to him and kissed her wildly several times—on the face and on her fluffy squirrel hat.

"But you don't know me at all," she whispered.

His lips travelled to her neck and he felt the warm skin soften at their touch.

"Nonsense," he said feelingly. "We shall see better times together. What's this button doing here?"

"You know," she said, her voice still lower. "I'm not a virgin."

"That's all the same to me," he said.

He omitted all that when he told Bezais about that evening. He did not attach much importance to such matters but he thought it better not to chatter about them.

Afterwards they walked the whole night through the ringing, frosty streets and kissed. He laid his hand over her beating heart; he felt himself capable of doing the most desperate things. He was so full of happiness that at first he replied to her questions absent-mindedly. She spoke of their future life together, of love, of work. He nodded and agreed with everything she said.

She could not wait in Chita for Matveyev to leave. She had bought her ticket and a commissar she knew

had promised to accompany her all the way to Khabarovsk.

"I have to go," she said when Matveyev begged her to wait for him, and he fell silent, feeling that it was better not to argue. They decided that he should meet her in Khabarovsk and then they would travel on together, to the Maritime Region.

"College can wait," she said with a laugh.

Then they talked about Moscow: how fine it would be to go there together when the war was over, to study together and go to the theatre and cook dinner on a primus.

"If it could be arranged," she said, "I'd like us to live in separate rooms. Then we'd never grow tired of each other. I'd come to you and you'd come to me. Right?"

"I think it'd be excellent," he said, making a serious effort to believe it.

There was only one fly in the ointment, but that was his own fault. Hard as he tried, he could not produce any tender phrases—he just couldn't pronounce them. He called her "dear" and "sweet" but those were clumsy, insipid words which were applicable even to a cat. He made several attempts to say something quite silly—even "my little sun" or "my little heart"—but nothing came of it. He was afraid they would sound funny.

The streets were dark and the lamps were out when they reached the hostel door again.

"Well, good-bye," she said as she opened the door. "It's very late, nearly dawn. You won't forget my address in Khabarovsk? Come tomorrow evening, I'll expect you."

"Good night, my dear. But there's one little thing you've forgotten to tell me."

"What's that?"

"Have you forgotten?"

"No, I don't even know what it is."

"That you love me. You haven't told me that."

She pressed herself against him.

"I love you very much. Are you pleased?"

"Yes. Well, good night, my ..."

He faltered.

"...my dear," he said, angry with himself.

BEZAIS AND ROMANTICISM

THE AMUR Railway is comparatively new. Earlier, before the line was built, people travelled from Chita to Khabarovsk by horse-drawn sledge in winter, and in the summer months they took one of the old tall-funnelled paddle steamers which went along the Amur, scaring the countless flocks of duck in the reeds. In the taiga the harsh forest vines blossomed generously; wild bees hummed over hollow trees, and enormous grey elks trod softly on the rotting carpet of pine needles. In the autumn, dense shoals of salmon came to spawn in the Amur and the river seethed with the great fish. Along the banks clandestine gold-panning went on and pearls were found too. The river wound through free, unprospected regions where the land lay virgin for thousands of versts.

The railway was pushed through marsh and mounds. Half-naked Chinese and shaven-headed convicts worked on it. They chopped down trees in the thick scrub,

and clouds of mosquitoes whined over the bonfires. Sleepers were laid on the untrodden soil and porcelain telegraph insulators screwed into the tree trunks. Then came the governor and cut a taut tricolour ribbon with a pair of scissors. The line was open.

Later on it was blown up by Whites and Reds in turn.

From the heart of the damp taiga soldiers emerged in sheepskins of unknown regiments; they cut the telegraph wires, unbolted the rails, spiked the points and disappeared again into the taiga. The sleepers rotted and crumbled. At forgotten halts tawny grass sprouted through the floors and the wind rustled the torn time-tables on the walls. Railway engines with caved-in sides stood rusting on the sidings.

"I know many people," said Bezais, "who would envy us from the bottom of their hearts. Our country is more or less on holiday these days. The war is over there, in Russia, and people have turned their hands to other things. I've seen with my own eyes how they have put spittoons on the station platforms and fine you if you throw a cigarette end on the ground. Those happy, carefree times, when you worked in the morning, and in the evening went to the bridge to exchange shots with bandits—oh, that's all finished there. But we've gone back to nineteen-nineteen. Back to the front, with the Whites and all that."

They were lying on the floor in their greatcoats, their heads propped on their elbows, and they had been arguing from early morning about everything they happened to notice. It was a cosy indoor sport, all the cosier because they did not even have to get up. The train had been at a standstill since dawn at a halt.

They spent three hours discussing why the telegraph poles were numbered. Not that it mattered to them—but they argued like mad.

A cold sunlight streamed through the windows. The kettle simmered on the stove. Bezais was now talking about the war years that were over. He had enjoyed those years and would not have missed them for anything. Of course, you couldn't go on fighting for ever, but that didn't mean it wasn't good while it lasted. Times like that, he said, only happened once in a century; people would be sorry they hadn't been born earlier. Thousands of men and women had prepared the Revolution, had worked like mad for it, full of hope—and had died without seeing it. But they, Bezais and Matveyev, with others who were born at the right time—they were seeing it. All the spade-work had been done before their time and they could take the cream off the whole century. They lived in the most brilliant, the noblest of all times. Take the little town he, Bezais, lived in—a wretched, dirty place with endless fences and a church and a Dvoryanskaya Street. But it had seethed with the Revolution—there was not one of its most wretched streets that hadn't known its deaths and its victories. On that Dvoryanskaya Street where people used to eat sunflower seeds and sell sweets one young fellow from the People's Commissariat of Education had pumped six bullets into the Whites and put the seventh through his own head. Bezais had known him, he had a squint and told silly Armenian jokes. Had he lived in another time he would have become a sappy fellow hanging about the streets and later on the father of a family. But in our times he had died a hero's death. There was anoth-

er man too, the head of a music school, a stout, good-natured fellow with wide trousers. At his school he taught several girls to strum on the piano and called it the New Art. But when they were recovering the town from the Whites he got hold of a machine-gun and took three prisoners. He had never done anything of the sort in all his life and afterwards had no idea how he'd managed it.

Bezais knew many cases when the most ordinary, dull people suddenly performed the most heroic deeds. Those times ennobled people and made them see things in a new light. And now every remote, fly-blown little town had its heroes, its martyrs, its victories. Previously, houses and trees and streets existed by themselves, but now they were the gains of war and every telegraph pole was a trophy.

And if Bezais had been in a position to choose whether he wanted to live at the present time or under communism he would have unhesitatingly chosen the former.

"Communism," he said, "will last for hundreds of years maybe, but these years are drawing to a close and you and I are now chasing after them so that we can look on them for the last time. This is our last meeting with them—they're on the way out—eighteen, nineteen, twenty. They've done their job, they're standing at the door, putting on their galoshes and saying: 'Well, lads, all the best.'"

Matveyev was just about to retort when the kettle boiled over. They sat down to their breakfast, after which they flopped down on to their greatcoats again and lay there for several hours. The train had still not moved.

"Somebody ought to go and see what's up," said Matveyev at last. "The damned train's stood here since early morning."

"Well, you could go."

"Why should I do the job? D'you find it hard to get up?"

"Maybe I don't. But I don't like to see you being so lazy. Instead of lying around demoralized and leading a dissipated life you could have gone for the water. Whose turn is it today?"

"Don't worry. I'll fetch the water. But someone ought to go to the station and find out why we've stopped. Go on, Bezais, don't play the fool."

"Why should I? Go yourself."

They wrangled a few more minutes but neither of them went.

"I've no intention of killing myself with work while you flop around doing nothing," said Bezais.

Matveyev turned over and went to sleep. Bezais waited a little, sat at the piano, played his Dead March and then woke up Matveyev to ask him to go to the station. Matveyev fell asleep again. It was impossible to get a sensible word out of him. Bezais lay down near the stove and, eyeing the symbolic girl on the poster, began to work out how far the minute hand of his watch had travelled since the train left Moscow.

"Suppose," he whispered tensely, "suppose the watch has a circumference of five centimetres. That means the hand moves one hundred and twenty centimetres a day. Good. So in a month it moves ..."

He worked hard and long at the sum but got muddled up with the noughts and had to start all over again. It turned out that the hand had travelled thirty-

six metres. He woke Matveyev again, nudging him in the ribs, rolling him from side to side, clapping his hands in his ear.

"D'you know, from the time we left Moscow the minute hand on my watch has travelled thirty-six metres," he gabbled when Matveyev opened his eyes.

"I thought so," muttered Matveyev and dozed off again.

This grew really tedious. After a while, Bezais decided to walk to the station. He got up, put on his coat and climbed down from the carriage. A minute later he burst in again and flung himself at Matveyev.

"Get up," he yelled. "Get up straight away, d'you hear? The train's left while we were sleeping. Come to your senses. It's gone."

"What's gone?"

"The train."

"Where?"

"How do I know? To Khabarovsk, I suppose."

Matveyev lay down again.

"I know your tricks," he said with deep conviction. "That's a game for fools."

"Honestly, it's true. Come on, turn round. Our carriage is absolutely on its own. There's no train."

Matveyev sat up.

"You're lying, Bezais," he said calmly.

"Well, come and look for yourself."

Matveyev put on his coat, went out and saw that Bezais had been telling the truth. The train was not there; their carriage stood on the track alone and the Negroes on the side of it grinned as if in mockery. On the other side of the line was a tiny station with a rusty sign and a green bell. It was buried in snow

almost to the roof top. All around, snow and mountains stretched as far as the eye could see.

They dashed to the station, burst into a shabby room and found there a wizened, wrinkled-faced man with big round ears. He was sitting on the floor repairing a stool and was covered with shavings. A grey goat stood munching hay behind a low fence across one corner of the room.

"Who uncoupled our coach?" Matveyev growled. "Who are you anyway? Where's the commandant?"

The man raised himself on to all fours and looked up at them with mad eyes.

"Who uncoupled the coach, I'm asking?"

They intimidated the man with their shouting, their mandates and violent demands. This forgotten, snow-bound halt had not heard a voice raised above speaking tone for a long time. The two strangers had descended on the place like a sudden disaster and turned the quiet winter day upside down.

"Just a moment," the man said, trying to conceal his emotion with an embarrassed and piteous smile. "Just a moment, please."

He shuffled out of the room and soon returned with a sleepy-looking man with a big beard. The newcomer buttoned his braces and yawned, revealing horrible teeth.

"Well, we uncoupled you," he said, covering his mouth with his hand. "Want to know who did it? I did it. Because the spring's broken. So I had to, you see. The carriage has slumped right down on the left."

"What spring are you talking about?"

"Oh, just an ordinary spring."

"Then why didn't you wake us up?"

“Well, I didn’t, that’s all.”

Matveyev wrote down the man’s name, threatening him with court proceedings, a fine and forced labour. The man then went back to bed. They discovered from the first man on duty roughly what had happened. Hurriedly and with embarrassed politeness he told them that the train had pulled in at dawn, that the coach was slumping down to the left because of the broken spring and that it could not be taken any further. The doors were locked—that was true, Matveyev had locked them himself the night before—the coach had been uncoupled and pulled into a siding. The man agreed that there had been breaches of regulations but he was not to blame for that; as for the goat which had been brought into an office during the cold weather, he promised to remove it without fail. He brought his whole appearance and the expression of his simple face into play in an effort to emphasize the fact that he was not personally implicated in the events.

Together the three of them returned to the coach and examined the spring, seizing on every detail. Then the man went back to the station and Bezais and Matveyev climbed into the saloon. They were bowled over by all that had happened. It was dinner-time already but they did not feel like either eating or drinking. After a while Bezais ran back to the station to curse the man. What irritated him above all was the fact that everything was so easily explained. He would have taken it more lightly had there been an explosion, a hurricane, a collision. But to discard people at an unknown railway halt because of a broken spring—that seemed to him a piece of howling injustice.

The rest of the day went badly. The sun blazed in a cloudless sky, bathing the broad expanse of snow in a dazzling light. They ate their dinner in silence, avoiding each others' eyes. They went to the station to inquire when the next train was expected. No one there knew.

"No train is expected," they were told, "but maybe one will turn up by chance."

Stations always bored Bezais to death. He found the whole setting oppressive—as if someone had deliberately collected there the dustiest, most faded papers, the murkiest lamps, the most boring people. He read from beginning to end the Constitution of the Far Eastern Republic that hung on the wall, stroked a cat which wandered about aimlessly and, sitting near the wall, pressed his fingers lightly on his eyelids and looked at the station-master. This turned the fellow into two, and he seemed to rock and swim away into the depth of the room.

But in the evening, as they sat in their saloon near the extinct stove, abusing the station-master and the broken spring, a train arrived unexpectedly. Big and black and lampless it came hurtling round a bend and stood puffing near the station. Bezais and Matveyev ran for a long time around the sealed ammunition waggon and begged to be let into the van occupied by the security squad escorting the train; but they were not let in and were sent to the last van in which some partisan detachment was travelling. From inside this van came muffled shouts and the whine of an accordion; black smoke billowed from the chimney.

Their messtins rattling, they ran to the tail of the train and knocked on the side of the van. The door

slid open a few centimetres and a bar of light streamed into the snowy darkness.

"Who are you?"

"We're on official business," replied Matveyev.

"Have you got papers?"

"Yes."

There was silence within.

"You're not Jews, are you?" a gay base voice shouted from the depth of the van.

"No."

"All right, climb up."

They lost no time getting through the door, fearing that the inmates of the van would change their mind. The warm stifling air, the hot stove, the sounds of talk and laughter made them feel quite cosy and comfortable.

By the light of the smoky lamp they saw a jumble of human beings, sacks and weapons. Men with bombs and revolvers at their belts lay or sat on white pine bunks, their bare legs dangling down, stripped to the waist because of the heat. Tins of food rolled on the floor under the bunks; against the wall stood a tall pile of loaves. There were women sitting on sacks near the stove, eating cedar-nuts. Matveyev and Bezais fixed themselves up on some cases near the door and looked around.

A reckless game of cards was in progress on the bunks, and around a candle on a sheet of newspaper copper and silver coins piled up in a bank. To one side a thickly bearded partisan was fashioning a paper dove with clumsy hands. There were all sorts of people in the van: young men with forelocks drooping on their brows, and old, smoke-seasoned greybeards. The

van stank of strong spirits, everyone was drunk, and this united them—the old and the young—making them all brothers.

Drunker than all was a short lean man with yellowish eyes who staggered about the van from end to end. The others called him Maiba. His hair fell in ashen, wet curls on to his forehead. Because of the heat he had unbuttoned his undershirt to reveal a sunken chest. He wore reindeer boots with the fur on the outside and breeches of officer's cloth, which sagged from the weight of the pistol that dangled from his belt.

The whole of his short body was possessed with a thirst for action. He looked for something to do and the van was too constricted for him. He kept clenching his fists and whispering something inaudible. Digging into his pockets he pulled out a piece of rope and, going to the fire, began loosening a knot in it.

"No, first you must prove it to me," Matveyev heard him whisper. "Ruble twenty. A fool can do that for ruble twenty."

Then he looked under a bunk and kicked the sacks lying there. Inaction weighed on him like a burden. He cast his eyes around and staggered. Suddenly his attention was arrested by a piece of paper on the floor. With uncertain steps he walked to it and tried to pick it up. Swaying, he almost sat on the stove and, attempting to recover his equilibrium, knocked his head against a beam. For some minutes he stood in silence, staring angrily at the beam, and then he stooped for the paper once more.

It was a struggle with the elements. The train was now on the move and the jolts of the van added to

Maiba's unsteadiness. From their bunks the men watched him with interest, wondering how the chase was going to end. Maiba clenched his teeth, fixed his eye on the paper, aimed his hand at it and made a violent lunge. Again he missed. With mounting irritation he cast his angry bloodshot eyes round the van. He thought he had got it that time, but at the last moment he had been flung off his balance, and that angered him. He was a sorry sight. One of the partisans slid down from a bunk, picked up the piece of paper and handed it to him. Maiba looked at him wildly.

"Drop it," he shouted at the top of his voice. "Put it back in its place, you trash. What are you groveling for? I've no room for grovellers in my detachment. Put it back where it was."

He resumed his chase, upset the water-pot, fell sideways on to the women, but suddenly grabbed hold of the piece of paper. Then he tried to recall why he needed it. Finally he went over to the stove, opened the door and awkwardly pushed the paper into the flames.

After that Maiba moved off humbly with the expression of someone who has fulfilled a difficult but unavoidable duty. Awareness of this calmed him down. For a time he stood still, looking for something else to do. Matveyev felt those yellow eyes fall on him and it gave him an unpleasant sensation like the sound of a finger-nail scratching glass.

But inaction began to irk Maiba again. Once more he dug into his pockets, drew out a fistful of cartridges and shoved them back again. He went over to a

partisan who was sitting on a bunk, took the paper dove from his hands and examined it closely.

"Gul-gul-gul," he said.

Matveyev watched him anxiously. What trick would the man be up to next?

A burly partisan with a handsome peasant face came over to Matveyev and Bezais. He breathed a warm smell of bread and spirits into Matveyev's face, glanced at Bezais, and finally asked:

"Relatives?"

"No," said Matveyev.

"Friends, eh?"

"Uh-huh."

He looked them over again, smiled unaccountably and asked:

"Where've you come from?"

"Moscow."

"I see, from Moscow."

The lamp flickered with a dim light, making everything look insufferably boring. The flame curled into a thin stream of soot. The rifles and cartridge pouches hanging on the walls tinkled tonelessly to the rhythm of the wheels. Matveyev began to doze. He saw many things at once: sunshine, cherry orchards, a football field where his side was knocking the spots off a visiting team from Sedelsk. Through the oscillating haze of his dream he saw once more the befouled floor, the stove, the restless drunk swaying about the van. Now the man was standing near the women talking politely to them.

"Sit where you are, please," he said, rocking, clutching at the air with his hands. "For heaven's sake,

excuse me. I do hope the stove isn't smoking and bothering you."

"So you're friends, are you?" the bearded partisan asked with a broad smile.

"Yes," replied Matveyev sleepily. "Friends."

That had been a wonderful day—July 3, 1920. The town did not forget it for a long time—the day when they ran the blue-shirted Sedelsk side off their feet and won the intertown trophy. The trophy was made of clay, the work of a local sculptor of leftist tendency, and it was called "Labour Triumphant"—a terrible object which made one feel quite ill to look at. It was a jumble of cubes, legs, female breasts, wheels, rakes and something else. The Commissar of education, a handsome, grey-haired old man, presented this clay horror to the team on a tray. Behind him stood representatives of the Gubernia Military Commissariat, the Gubernia Party Committee, the Gubernia Komsomol Committee. The band played and squeals came from the group of the women's department. Far away in the crowd Matveyev noticed his father and mother who were in transports of joy. Afterwards the team marched through the town—heavily built young men with powerful necks, as alike as brothers. They were the elite of the town—young men with the broadest shoulders, prominent chests, the arms of athletes and soldiers. And Matveyev was among them.

"So you've come from Moscow."

"Yes, from Moscow."

"Well, you've nothing to worry about seeing you've jumped into my van," Matveyev heard Maiba telling the women. "Who has shoved that cartridge pouch in here? You, I suppose, Yukhim. Take that bloody car-

tridge pouch away 'at once, it's bumping this little lady in the back."

And again:

"Now then, Yukhim, that's not nice. Don't listen to him, for heaven's sake. He can't live without swearing. Goes home and swears in the presence of his mother. Living the way we do a man turns into a horse and quite forgets how decent people speak. Tell him: 'Please be so kind, dear Comrade Yukhim Sukhanov, I'm asking you,' and he answers you with such a mouthful of oaths...."

A little later Matveyev heard:

"You fool. You get much more by being polite and tender than with your horse-like manners. How can you swear like that? You shouldn't miss your chance, brother. In a strange land even an old woman is a gift from the gods. It happens—she'll treat you kindly."

Maiba shuffled his feet skittishly. Someone began to sing.

The sin of vanity, thought Matveyev in his dreams.

"Yes," said Maiba. "That old girl only needs to be bound in iron and she'd last another ten years. Yes, she would."

He went over to a young woman who was muffled up in a dark shawl. He laid his hand on her shoulder. The woman edged away. Matveyev caught a brief glimpse of the sparkle of her moist eyes.

"What are you scared of? I'm not a beast. I'm not... at all ... like that. Well, you are a funny one, I must say."

Maiba had his back to Matveyev who could see only his sharp shoulder-blades. The man said something in an undertone but the woman did not reply. Matveyev dozed off again.

He dreamed about his horse, a big, good-natured animal. It was on the heavy side but moved well. Its shaggy legs stepped firmly. On its brow it had a white, heart-shaped mark. Its heavy mane and tail were black as night and its muscles rippled under its skin in tense knots. There were other fine horses in the division, better mounts than his; but they fed his horse because it was so muscular and heavy. This did not worry Matveyev. His horse galloped straight with tremendous power which nothing could check. Together they covered many a verst and grew accustomed to each other. That's an old thing—love between man and horse is no younger than any other kind of love.

And then his horse was killed, one morning near a river, on the yellow sand. It was a terrible death, like that of a human being. It seemed to be wanting to say something. Matveyev would never forget the look in its dark eyes.

"Yes, from Moscow," he said through his dream.

Something was worrying Bazais. He was breathing deeply and tossing from side to side. He nudged Matveyev several times. Finally Matveyev heard him whisper indignantly:

"I shall shoot that beast."

"Who?"

"That scoundrel."

"Better not try," said Matveyev and fell asleep.

He slept soundly and heard nothing more. He slept for a long time, perhaps for some hours, rocked by the jolting van. Suddenly he felt blows being rained on his head and back. Someone stepped on his legs. He was being beaten in earnest, the blows were well directed. He hardly managed to wake up, it was so unexpected; all he knew was that a tremendous din was going on around him. A violent blow on the head awakened him thoroughly and at once he realized with unusual clarity that he was being dragged towards the open door of the van through which he saw a thick grey curtain of driven snow.

He was horrified, panic-stricken. With desperate strength he jerked his legs and tried to tear himself free, but at that moment he was lifted by a dozen hands and flung out of the van. Spinning in the air he was swallowed up in the darkness. He felt a biting wind in his face. Then everything ended in a sudden frightful bump.

Growling with rage and waving his arms, Matveyev crawled out of the deep snow. He felt like murder. He heard the hiss of wheels, saw the tail of the train flash past. The trail of snow after it rose like white smoke. He ran after the train but stopped at once, realizing that he could not catch it up: the swaying red lamp on the last van was already far ahead.

He looked around. He did not seek an explanation of what had happened, that would have been impossible. It was incredible. Such things just do not happen. You could go mad trying to think of an explanation, but you'd never find the right one. Only one thing was beyond doubt—that he was standing in the fields, out in the frost, half-soaked with snow, under

the dim light of the stars. He sat down on the snow, got up again and suddenly let out a long, unnaturally complicated oath. But that didn't help.

Far ahead the train clattered along the line. Then there was a sudden silence, that cautious silence of great open spaces. Matveyev shoved his hands into his pockets and pulled out handfuls of snow.

"What's all this?" he asked in a hurt tone.

He crawled on to the snow-drift but, sinking in it up to his waist, clambered back. Then he heard someone calling his name, swung round and a few paces away saw a dark shape on the snow. He walked towards it and found Bezais sitting in the snow. Bezais looked up at him and smiled faintly.

"You too?" he said.

"What?"

"Did they throw you out too?"

"I'll find them in Khabarovsk," said Matveyev, dropping on to the snow. "I'll settle account with them. The swine. Were they drunk or what?"

"They were pestering her," said Bezais, shutting his eyes. "What have they done to my head?"

"I'll not let them get away with this," said Matveyev, consoling himself with useless threats. "But what on earth are we going to do now?"

He suddenly noticed that Bezais had a revolver in his right hand.

"What's that for?" he asked. Something dawned on him. "Did you?..."

"Yes," said Bezais with a vague smile. "I couldn't stand it."

"Did you fire?"

"No, there wasn't time. They biffed me so hard on the head that I thought they'd broken my skull."

"Was it because of that girl?"

Bezais slipped the revolver into his pocket and dropped his eyes guiltily.

"Don't blame me," he said imploringly. "You should have seen them. I think they were going to rape her."

"You think so. But what's it got to do with you?"

Matveyev raised himself on to all fours, trembling with rage.

"Idiot," he almost howled. "Being romantic, are you? The defender of sweet innocence? I'll kill you for that, here on the spot."

Bezais had a spasm of nausea. He felt bad.

"I'll kill you myself," he muttered, fighting hard with his weakness. "A young girl ... and very pretty too. Do you think I was calmly going to watch her being raped. That scoundrel Maiba had pulled her on to his bunk."

"But don't you realize you've been entrusted with a Party job, you fool. Don't you understand? You can get your head smashed when you're free, but now all those sweet maidens and noble deeds are not your business."

Bezais meant to reply but did not manage to. He saw Matveyev's frightened face and the dark sky with the vague stars and then everything disappeared.

THAT WAS A SIX-INCH

LATER on Bezais often explained what had happened, and in detail; but his own explanation never satisfied him. Of course, it was one of those absurd, sud-

den impulses which make a man do the most awful things. He had drawn his revolver automatically, without thinking what he was doing. But he was too young to regard people as mere stuff, and had not learned to force himself to shut his eyes and ears when necessary.

"It was stupid of me," he said much later, when he recalled all that, "but all the same, I must say ..."

"That's enough, that's enough," said Matveyev.

He explained his point of view to Bezais. A man's life is cheap and you should not worry about every individual. If you did, it was impossible to fight or, in fact, to do anything at all. You had to think of people as platoons and companies, not as individuals, but in the mass. It was not simply a question of expediency, it was just because you were taking a risk yourself; if you did not think about yourself you had the right not to think about others too. What does it matter to you who is shot or robbed or raped? You must think of your class—individuals will always look after themselves.

"If you want to be a Bo'shevik," Matveyev concluded, "you must first of all stop being a wreck."

But Bezais did not agree with him.

Opening his eyes he saw Matveyev leaning over him and groping for his heart.

"Take your hand away, Matveyev," he said, sitting up. He felt ashamed of his weakness. "Your fingers are cold."

"D'you think you can stand?"

"I'll try. What about you?"

He turned his head; his ears felt frost-bitten. Looking round he noticed the dark, star-spangled sky over-

head. Matveyev was on his knees supporting him by the shoulders.

"I'm quite frozen, Matveyev," said Bezais, fingering his ears and struggling to his feet. "Are you all right?"

"More or less."

Bezais rubbed his ears and slowly collected his thoughts. He touched his head gingerly. The skin on his left temple was broken and blood streamed slowly down his cheek.

"They've made a pretty mess of me," he said guiltily.

"You asked for it," said Matveyev caustically. "Now tell me, please, who asked you to poke your nose in? Why did you have to do it?"

"Well, it wasn't my fault," retorted Bezais capriciously. He pressed some snow to his bruised head and winced. "It was all that silly girl's fault. How could I lie there calmly while they raped her?"

"Take it easy," said Matveyev. "She's sitting behind you."

Bezais looked over his shoulder. The girl was behind him, kneeling too, and blowing on her hands to warm them. Bezais felt embarrassed.

"If you think I'm so silly," she said in an injured tone, "why didn't you keep quiet? I jumped out myself."

The situation was awkward and Bezais was wondering what he ought to say when he felt bad again. A few moments of oblivion followed in which he saw vaguely Matveyev's face, the snow, the sky, and heard a murmur of voices. He felt quite frozen.

"No," he heard Matveyev say. "The train does about

twenty versts an hour on an average. We couldn't make it."

"I don't understand," the girl said wearily. "It's all the same to me."

Then he felt Matveyev shaking him by the shoulders. He sat up with an effort and asked for a cigarette. In the light of the match he saw the girl's face, a full face with pink, freckled cheeks. Her fair hair glittered with snow-flakes. A livid scratch ran across one cheek to the chin. In the train he had thought, for some reason, that her eyes were dark and that she had a thin, nervous face. He struck another match but she turned away and he saw only the scratched cheek and her neck with small curls of hair lying on it.

The cigarette made his head spin. His body grew torpid with a chilly drowsiness.

"What was the name of that station?" Matveyev asked. "D'you know, Varya?"

"No. Maybe we'd better go back to it."

"No, we'll go on," he replied, digging his heel aimlessly into the snow. "Oh, hell, what a stupid business. As if we hadn't enough to worry about anyway."

"And all because of me."

"Oh, shut up," he said to her. "All right, because of you. So what?"

The wretch, thought Bezais, and said:

"What did it have to do with her? It was my fault."

"Just what I said. You ..." began Matveyev, but stopped with a shrug. "How are you feeling?" he added more calmly. "D'you think you can walk?"

"I think so. But it would be better to light a fire and wait here till morning."

"Oh no. No fires. That's the quickest way to freeze. Let's get moving. Please."

It all seemed to Matveyev awfully stupid.

"It's cold," said Varya, shivering. "How are you going to get through the snow in those boots?"

"I'll manage somehow," Matveyev replied dryly.

He glanced at her bent, snow-spattered figure and felt a wave of pity for her. What had come over him, he wondered. What had she got to do with the business in hand?

"Bezais, don't fall off to sleep. Please," he said.

"I'm not asleep. I'm hungry."

"Hang on a bit."

They got up. Bezais tottered and sat down again on the snow. The other two raised him to his feet, put his arms over their shoulders and led him on. Bezais found it hard to move his legs; he felt an overwhelming desire to sleep. The blood thumped noisily at his temples and he saw rainbow rings floating before his eyes. He wanted to lie down, to stretch his numb arms and shut his eyes. But he had to go on, and he went, pressing Varya's neck with his arm a little harder, maybe, than was necessary, and feeling her warm breath on his cheek. They walked along the sleepers searching the darkness ahead for the lights of the next station. But all around them hung a dense snowy darkness.

At first the going was terribly hard. Bezais felt it worst in the legs, especially in his knees where the bones felt as though they were cracking and crunching in their sockets. It was a nasty thought which he tried to banish from his mind by picturing a long chain of horses jumping a ditch, and counting them.

At first he could not concentrate at all, his mind kept wandering. Having reached fifty he suddenly noticed that the girl was walking with difficulty and breathing heavily. He removed his arm from her shoulder.

"I can manage now," he said. "I'm feeling much better."

He walked behind them, missing his step and floundering in the snow. There were moments when he thought he was going to fall. Then he would stop, draw a deep breath and proceed. Gradually he lost all sense of feeling below the knees and walked mechanically as if in a delirium. He did not even feel tired. The horses flashed before his eyes, cantered up to the ditch and jumped, each one waving its tail and its mane the same way. He counted them in a whisper until his mouth felt dry.

"...at this distance. But surely that's not the main thing, is it, Bezais?" he heard Matveyev say.

"You're right," he replied wearily. "I'm terribly hungry."

But he forgot his hunger at once. Matveyev's voice sounded muffled, as if it came from afar. Later, when he recalled that night, it seemed to Bezais that he had walked endlessly, alone in an immense snow-field, oblivious of everything around him.

Towards morning it grew warmer. Bezais came out of his dreams and saw a forest running high up the mountain slopes. He vaguely remembered that during the night they had gone into the forest to gather brushwood and that then they had spent a long time kindling a fire with crumpled newspaper. The sky was veiled in cloud, and snow was falling heavily. A bare cliff rose precipitously on one side of the track.

Through the falling snow ahead loomed a deep hollow with rusty patches of marsh at the bottom.

Bezais sat on a litter of pine branches and, leaning on his elbows, waited impatiently for the kettle to come to the boil. Matveyev lay on the other side of the fire carefully examining a scratch on his hand that had healed fully a week ago. Varya sat at his side, scraping bread crumbs and dust off a piece of ham with a knife.

Matveyev carried his knapsack on his back and it had accompanied him when he was flung off the train. There was sugar, a pound of ham, bread and tea in the knapsack. This was not much and Matveyev proposed dividing it into rations for three days. Bezais felt wolfishly hungry after the walk through the night and with the light-mindedness of a healthy man insisted on a larger portion.

"Fine idea of yours," he said, "to starve a man."

But Matveyev was stubborn and did not agree.

"Don't play the fool, you're not a kid."

"All right, then I'll die," said Bezais.

He liked the thought and talked about his impending death all morning. He showed them how he froze to death in the snow and forgave them everything and how they wrung their hands over his corpse and cursed themselves for the vile idea of keeping him half starving. Then he told them how Matveyev would be tortured by his bad conscience and how Varya would weep and say she could never forget that nice, young, fair-haired man.

"Oh, please stop," said Varya. "Why are you talking about death all the time? I hate that kind of talk, it makes me feel a bit frightened. I begin to think that

someone might really die. Go and gather firewood. It's running out."

Of course, it would have been enough had one of them gone for firewood, but as though by tacit agreement they both rose and went into the forest.

"My foot had gone to sleep," said Matveyev.

They walked in the twilight under enormous trees with heavy branches like great outstretched paws. High overhead a squirrel darted in a little red ball in a flurry of snow dust. It was quiet in the forest. Bezais looked back at Varya and nudged Matveyev in the ribs.

"What d'you think of her?"

"All right," said Matveyev vaguely. "She really is."

"Not bad, eh?"

"Not at all bad."

"Everything in the right place," said Bezais, snapping a dry twig. "Notice her eyes? A woman's eyes, chum, are the main thing. Those freckles don't spoil her face, rather the contrary. And her front—why, it's an exhibition."

"Oh, she's not got much there."

"That's what's so good, not too much. How much d'you need?"

"Oh, I don't need anything. I've got my own girl."

Bezais took off his cap and shook the snow off it.

"Yes, you're all right. You're living on the fat of the land. We're still travelling but you've got someone waiting for you, crying and thinking you've been run over. You're one of life's spoilt darlings. But what about me? I never have any luck."

He rolled a snowball, flung it at Matveyev, but missed.

.. "Maybe she's feeling lonely for me but she's not crying," said Matveyev. "She's not that sort. In the hostel I saw her pull a mouse out of the trap and throw it to the cat. I'm not afraid of mice, they're nothing, but it's not often you find a woman who isn't scared of them. There's nothing namby-pamby about her. She's quite outspoken and calm about the riskiest subjects. 'I know,' she said, 'why boys like girls.'"

He stopped and, narrowing his eyes, indicated the way she had said it.

"Yes. 'What do we need that conventional language for?' she said. 'Let's be frank.' Anyway, you'll see her yourself."

"It's all up with you," said Bezais. "She's hooked you. You'll have a little angel who'll call you daddy."

"What d'you mean, 'hooked me'?"

"Just what I said. You'll marry her. And all the rest of it."

"You don't understand a thing, Bezais. That's because you haven't seen her. She's different. D'you realize what comradely relations between a man and a woman are?"

"I can imagine. That's for non-smokers. When a man makes a dishonourable suggestion to a decent woman and she turns him down he says to her: 'Let's have comradely relations.' Oh, I know the technique."

"Little you know. I wasn't turned down, you can be sure of that. Having comradely relations means we won't cramp each other's style. We'll team up and live together so long as we don't get in each other's way and it doesn't interfere with our work and our tastes. But if it does, then it's very simple: 'You want

to turn right? I see. Well, I'm going to turn left. That's all."

"How many years are you thinking of living with her?"

"I don't know. Maybe a hundred."

"Which of you started that talk about comradely relations?"

"She did. But I agreed with her."

"Well," said Bezais, "I find it surprising. I think I'd be hurt. You've only just explained your feelings to each other, kissed and so on. Then you start talking about getting in each other's way, growing tired of one another, and divorcing quietly, if need be. D'you like that?"

"All it amounts to is having a conscientious attitude to facts. Both of us know what love is and what it's for. We team up like reasonable people and discuss our future. But you'd like to fall in love with some rhapsodical woman, with tears and pledges and locks of hair for remembrance and all the other trappings of a provincial love-affair."

Bezais said nothing for a while.

"The devil only knows what I want," he said haltingly. "But I don't think I'd object to her crying a bit—ever so little—and calling me her angel. One thing I insist on, anyway, that when I told her I loved her she should blush. Let her attitude towards love be a conscientious one, as you say, let her know everything. But it would hurt my feelings if I were to tell her I loved her and she should just pick her teeth with a match and jiggle her legs and say: 'All right, Bezais, I love you too, dear.' What I mean is,

let a girl be advanced and clever and enlightened, but don't let her lose the capacity for blushing."

"It was dark," said Matveyev, examining his scratch again. "Maybe she did blush. But, generally speaking, it's a silly thing to ask of a girl. Why d'you think it necessary?"

"Where a-a-are you?" they heard Varya call.

"Coming," shouted Bezais.

They broke off a few more twigs, brushed away the snow that had fallen on them from the trees, and walked back. Suddenly they stopped and exchanged looks. Breaking the still silence of the forest came a deep bass rumble. Though they heard the sound clearly it obviously came from afar. They stood in silence for a few seconds and the sound they were waiting for reached their ears, faint but unmistakable. Bezais dropped his load of brushwood on the snow and without a word looked into Matveyev's eyes.

"There's no doubt what that is," said Bezais.

"No, there isn't," said Matveyev. "That's a six-inch. The shot and then the burst."

"It wasn't very far away. About forty versts, I think."

"Maybe even further. It's a warm day and sound carries farther when there's mist about. At night you can calculate more accurately—by the time between the sound of the firing and the shell-burst. It might have been even fifty versts away."

"At the station they told me we were fifty versts from Khabarovsk."

"That doesn't mean anything. It might be practice shooting."

A second rumble interrupted him. They stopped again and listened carefully. This time the sound was muffled and they did not hear the burst.

"Practice firing in a front-line town?" said Bezais. "That's impossible. You know it isn't that. This is something else."

"Well, it's not really surprising. After all, we knew already that the front was somewhere near Khabarovsk. That's no news. As if you'd never heard gunfire before."

"Agreed. But the whole point is in which direction the front is. It was very clear, you know."

"Well, maybe we're nearer to Khabarovsk than we thought."

They came out of the forest. Varya was leaning over the haversack cleaning mugs. She put into her chore so much feminine care and attention that there might have been no taiga, no gunshot.

"Sometimes women are much calmer than men," said Matveyev. "But that's because they lack imagination. They're incapable of thinking of the next day."

"Where have you been?" asked Varya. "I thought you'd got lost. I expect the tea's quite cold."

"As if tea was important," said Bezais, listening absent-mindedly.

Breakfast passed in silence.

"This is senseless," said Matveyev as he watched Varya packing the haversack. "We can't go on like this. We must press on as fast as possible and here we are dawdling in this damned forest. We have no right to get involved in all kinds of adventures. I've had enough of this food. We ought to have been in Khabarovsk by now."

They rose, damped^o the fire with snow and left. They heard no more gunshot. Matveyev had the idea of taking Varya's arm but thought better of it. He walked ahead trying to step from sleeper to sleeper. The snow was now falling even thicker—the heavy flakes were as big as five-kopek coins, and the air was as thick as milk. The going was heavy, for lumps of ice quickly formed on the heels of their boots. At first Matveyev thought about snow-drifts and then for some reason about the Futurists. In rhythm with his steps the lines ran in his head:

*Enough of living by laws
Made by Adam and Eve....*

Sometimes he wrote poems himself and it was the worst thing he could do. He knew they were no good but he firmly trusted in the great god of stubborn people and never lost hope of writing better ones. He concealed his weakness as best he could; he was ashamed of it. Once he risked publishing them in the local *Communist* but only on conditions of the strictest secrecy. On the next day he was met at the District Party Committee with his own poems sung to the tune: "Oh, little bird, you're caught...."

Bezais overtook him.

"Don't go so fast," he said. "She can't keep up with us."

Matveyev looked back. Varya was lagging behind. She walked bent up and was covered with snow. Realizing that they were watching her she raised her head and smiled, but Matveyev turned his head away.

"Oh, hell," he said. "Another blow. What are we going to do about her?"

"Why, what have you got against her?"

"Well, she'll grow tired and sit down and say: 'My boots are pinching. Go and gather firewood and light the fire, I'm cold. And I want a piece of cake.' I know the sort."

"Well, listen to me. I like that girl. I want to try my luck. Not everyone has your luck—you got yours on a plate but I've got to get her with the sweat of my brow. I'll work like an ox: I'll tell her I'm lonely, that people don't understand me and that she's got eyes like, say, a gazelle. And then I'll spin in a whirlpool of passion too."

Matveyev looked at him with curiosity.

"What a rake you are," he said. "A bit of fun and games, eh?"

"Oh no, just a few kisses. Tea without sugar, so to say. I've got out of the habit since I left Moscow."

"Did you have some girl in Moscow?"

"A brunette," said Bezais, trying to make what he said sound true. "But this one's not bad, don't you think?"

Matveyev glanced over his shoulder.

"She's rosy-cheeked and blonde. I don't like cream buns. Besides, she's probably a *petite bourgeoise*."

"They can't all be advanced and intelligent. I like her."

For a time they walked on in silence.

"But you haven't got much time," said Matveyev. "We'll probably be in Khabarovsk tomorrow. We'll, say three days there and then we'll be going on. You're not thinking of taking her along with you, are you? You've got five days in all."

"That's enough. Besides, we don't know whether we're going to find a train at that station. And if we're going to walk to Khabarovsk—oh, there'll be time enough."

Matveyev pondered. True enough, there might be no train.

"It's a dog's life," he said. "If only socialism would dawn a bit quicker. What are we going to tell them at the Regional Party Committee? We'll have to explain why we're late."

"I'm not altogether certain the town is in our hands. I can't forget that gunshot."

"You *are* a nervy one."

"That's not true. It worries me but I'm not frightened. I'll gladly give my life for the Revolution and for the Party."

Matveyev winced. For some reason he did not like to use in conversation such phrases as "the world revolution," "the power of the Soviets" or "the victory of the proletariat." They were solemn, formal phrases which were spoiled by being used in ordinary conversation.

"You don't need to be very bright to do that. Death is a very simple thing. Everyone dies, it's an innate faculty. But you need to be clever to get on to a train and arrive in time."

"Well, I'm going to her," said Bezais. "Work before pleasure. I'll tell her what I felt when I saw her the first time."

"All power to your arm, old man."

Bezais waited and Matveyev walked on alone. At home, he had never known snow to fall so heavily. The rails were quite buried and Matveyev's feet sank deep

in drifts. He shook his head. Bezais was a beast. Matveyev guessed that Bezais had never kissed a girl in his life and that he only dreamed of doing it, like a little boy who dreams of owning a gun. He wanted to see how Bezais made up to the girl but he was too lazy to look back—at the slightest move of his head snow fell inside his collar. It melted and trickled disgustingly down his neck.

THE MIDDLE-AGED MAN

LATE that afternoon, when the day was already drawing in, Matveyev, turning a bend in the line, saw a man walking towards him.

"We must be near the station," Bezais said. "This must be some linesman inspecting his sector. No, I'd rather face death than be thrown off a train again. I even feel like singing."

They approached the man. He was middle-aged with a drooping moustache, dressed in a cloth coat and a squirrel-fur hat. He walked with his hands deep in his pockets.

"Good afternoon," said Matveyev when they met. "Is it far to the station?"

"Which station?" the man asked, eyeing them. "There are many stations."

"The nearest."

"Ten versts, maybe. Perhaps fifteen in all."

Matveyev looked at him incredulously.

"You'll not get there today in this snow," the man said. "You'll have to spend the night somewhere"

"What about you? Have you come from the station?"

"No, I, so to say . . ."

They fell silent; the man removed his hat and shook the snow off it, revealing a baldish head.

"Help me, young people," he said suddenly. "Maybe I'll pay you. You could easily earn fifty rubles by coming to the rescue of a man. I've had a most remarkable accident—my horses bolted, may God punish them."

"What made them bolt?"

"Devil knows what happened to them. Maybe some animal scared them. Or maybe it wasn't an animal but something else. A horse is a timid animal. It's tame and then something comes into its head and off it bolts. Maybe it's the forest—and off it'll go to the forest. Or water—and it'll make for water. Out of fright."

Matveyev eyed the man sceptically.

"Well, d'you want us to look for your horses? Why, they may have bolted ten versts."

"You don't have to look for them, they're here. Why, come and see! It's not far off. First they plunged aside, right over the tree stumps and hummocks, and then they came out on to the railway line and crashed down into the ditch. The sledge overturned and all the goods are spilled. I'll pay you, please don't worry about that. I'm the sort of man who means what he says."

Matveyev glanced at Bezais.

"Well, what d'you think?"

"Let's go and take a look."

They walked a short distance and found the horses. A broad sledge, trimmed with bast matting, lay on the

messed-up snow at the foot of a slope. Beside it, stepping on the reins and buried in the snow almost up to their girths, stood two horses. As the men approached, one of the horses turned its head and cast an indifferent look at them with its unblinking eyes. A number of big roped bales lay scattered in the snow together with a sheepskin coat and an empty milk bottle.

"Well, what's to be done about that?" asked Matveyev glumly.

The road ran along the other side of the railway embankment, beyond the forest. They would have to unharness the horses, drag the sledge over the embankment and reload the bales.

"Help me. Please, do," the man implored them.

Matveyev sat on a rail and lit a cigarette. There was a protruding nail in his left boot and his big toe was sore. He had taken a mental oath that he would not walk any further—fifteen versts!—and now he regarded this man they had met as his catch. It would be silly to let him slip through his fingers.

"Maybe we will," he said guardedly. "Where are you going?"

"Khabarovsk."

"I see. Drive us to the next station and we'll rescue your rubbish."

"I can't. I'd be only too glad to but I can't."

"Why not?"

"If I was travelling for myself, of course I'd take you. But I'm on duty and I can't make such a big detour. I'm a purchasing-agent. I drive from Churin's store to the villages, purchasing pelts. The railway stations all lie some way back from the road. I haven't the time."

Matveyev twiddled his fingers in his pockets. He was calculating: the embarkment was about six feet high, the bales weighed about ten poods. It was a fair deal. Money for jam.

"When will you reach Khabarovsk?"

"Tomorrow evening, I think."

"All right, it's on. We'll ride with you. Take us to Khabarovsk. What d'you say, Bezais?"

Before Bezais could reply, the man broke in:

"The horses are overdriven. And there are three of you. You know how things are nowadays. You can't get your hands on oats. I'd rather pay you so everything would be all right and no offence taken."

Matveyev rose to his feet and stubbed out his cigarette on his heel.

"We've no time," he said. "Wait for someone else to turn up. Maybe they'd like to earn some money."

"Where are you off to?"

"We're going on. To Khabarovsk."

They walked a few steps.

"Wait a minute," the man shouted. "You're a strange fellow. Pay me twenty rubles and I'll take you."

Matveyev stopped.

"Five. No more."

"Strange. Who would take you for five rubles?"

"You will. Not a kopek more."

"Fifteen?"

"Five. And that's that."

"Gold rubles?"

"Yes."

"All right. Come on."

At first they thought it was going to be easy work hauling the sledge and the bales up the slope, but

when Matveyev crawled down and handled one of the massive bales he realized they had some hard work ahead. The horses were hopelessly entangled in the harness and they had to dig into the snow under them to find the ends of the reins. When finally the horses were unharnessed the trouble with the sledge started. It was devilishly heavy and was almost entirely buried in the soft snow. The man and Bezais went to the top of the slope and tugged on a rope tied to the front of the sledge. Matveyev shoved from below, bandying oaths with Bezais as he strained. Then he climbed up the embankment and the man and Bezais went down together and exerted themselves till they were utterly exhausted.

"We must stamp on the snow," said Matveyev, flinging the rope down.

Nonsense, they shouted, that wouldn't help. They squabbled for a few minutes and then, after all, they set to stamping on the snow. Matveyev, it turned out, was right: inch by inch the sledge moved up the embankment and then went swashing down the other side.

It was quite dark when they dragged the bast bales to the sledge and loaded them. The man harnessed the horses and then went off to look for the empty milk bottle, walking about the snow and striking matches. He did not find it.

Shaking the snow off their clothes they sat on the sledge. Matveyev intended sitting beside Bezais but changed his mind and edged up to the front. There was not much room and they tried to fit themselves on the sledge so as to occupy the least space. The sledge began to run but the man suddenly reined the horses.

"My damned memory," he said. "You'll have to get off again. I'd quite forgotten to take my pill."

"Take it later," Matveyev said. "You'll have time enough. What's wrong with you?"

"Oh no, I must take it now. Three times a day, two hours before meals. Suffer from constipation."

The pills were in a basket under the seat. They all got off the sledge and waited while he dug out the basket and fumbled for the pills. He had to remove several shirts, a cup, some soap and sugar and a boiled chicken before he found them. Matveyev began to feel cold and stamped his feet in turn. The man lit a candle and rustled some paper in the basket.

"I can't make it out," he said. "I put them here before dinner and now I can't find them. Strange. Maybe I slipped them into the yellow portmanteau. I've got a memory like a worn-out pocket. I could never learn anything off by heart even when I was a little boy. What agony I had over the letter *Yat!*" And he spun off a list of words that were spelled with that letter. "I always made mistakes. The teacher was such a brute. 'You've left a word out, Zhukanov Philipp. Repeat your lesson.' I'd repeat it. And leave another word out. He'd shout at me again: 'Zhukanov Philipp, stand in the corner.' "

Bezais yawned.

"Find it, for heaven's sake. I'd rather die. What a time to take pills!"

The man found his pills in the basket, tucked into the sleeve of a shirt. He swallowed a pill, repacked the basket, and everybody got back on to the sledge. The new moon—a tender finger-nail—rose over the

treetops. The forest hemmed them in on each side with its tall dark walls.

Matveyev lay on the sledge, overpowered with the sensation of being on the move. He rested as he felt light patches of warmth spread gradually over his skin. Bezais was sitting on his feet and telling Varya all kinds of tales. Now that Bezais shared his plans with him he examined the girl with some interest. She was not bad-looking, he decided, but that was the best that could be said of her. He did not envy Bezais. In practically every *petit-bourgeois* family there was a girl like that, sensible, with rosy cheeks and braids. She spoke little, mainly confining herself to replies to questions. During the day he had heard her telling Bezais which were the most intelligent of the animals. She thought elephants were; she had even read somewhere how an elephant had looked after a baby. That had impressed her simple soul—she returned to the subject of elephants several times and laughed, and Bezais had joined in politely. Then they had started a tedious conversation about their favourite authors and so on.

"Do you like Lermontov?" she asked. "*Tsarina Tamara?*"

"I do," Bezais replied and a moment later, without any connection with Lermontov, asked her whether she liked choral singing and then they both badgered Matveyev with questions about Lermontov and choral singing and boating and cats and brunettes and all sorts of rubbish. She talked about the most commonplace things with comical ardour. "Music ennobles the soul" and "a woman ought to be a companion to a man," she said, as if she had invented the phrases.

The moon rose high over the dark trees. A warm smell of sweat and hay came from the horses, reminding Matveyev of stables, the creak of well sweeps and thatched cottage roofs. He stole a glance at Zhukanov and began to examine him with the happy sensation of being able to sit there quite still, looking at the man's face, at the stars, at the horses. Laziness held him by the shoulders in a firm grip as his eyes roved indulgently over Zhukanov's drooping moustache, his insignificant eyes and parched nose. He forgave him the big hairy mole on his upper lip and the bread crumbs in his moustache. He did not want to think badly of this man with the mole and the untidy moustache whom he had met on their great journey. Another day would pass and this pelt-buyer would be left far behind, a mere trace in the memory.

Late that evening they reached a village and stopped at the house of a friend of Zhukanov's. They hammered for a long time on the tall gates, and then a small spyhole opened in the wicket and a gruff voice asked who they were. Invisible hands rattled the bolt. Inside the yard enormous dogs strained frenziedly at their chains and leaped at the horses. The high, two-storied house, which was built of stout logs, had a low lean-to, and a roofed penthouse ran round the whole yard. The lower story of the house served as a barn and a porch with thick balusters led up steeply to the living-quarters. A wolfskin, with the furry side inwards, was nailed to the wall.

A tall old man unharnessed the horses. His eyes dwelled on Varya for no more than an instant, then he went indoors only to return at once.

"Just one thing," he said, pronouncing each word firmly. "No tobacco-smoking, please. If you don't mind. We do not smoke in my place. And do not sit indoors with your hats on. If you don't mind."

"We are nonsmokers," said Bezais.

"If you don't mind," the old man repeated.

He turned on his heel and left them, stepping firmly in his fur boots.

"He's angry," said Zhukanov quietly.

"What about?"

"Oh, because I've brought you here. You see, he's a sectarian, an Old Believer. They're all Old Believers in this village. I always stay with him. I buy his pelts. So, you see, he's used to me."

"What's wrong with us?"

"He's a man of old beliefs. He's afraid you'll spoil his house."

"What d'you mean—spoil it?"

"Spit on the floor or drink out of his mug. So please behave carefully."

The wide passage smelt of leather and dried herbs. They opened a dark cedar-plank door and went in.

The house was an old one, built ages ago. Squat, green-paned windows had been cut into the sturdy, age-worn beams of the walls. Several of thickly oiled hunting rifles hung on the walls and a big pair of antlers was nailed to the space between the windows. One corner was filled with icons, green with age, in which the stern, long-nosed, round-eyed faces of the saints were barely distinguishable. On a triangular table under the icons lay rosaries and a leather-bound book with brass clasps.

The family was at table. The old man who had met them in the yard laid down his spoon and stared at Bezais until, realizing what was the matter, he took off his hat. At the table, besides the old man, sat two tall, well-built young men and a little girl. A plump young woman took some pots from the oven and laid them noisily on the table, jerking her elbows angrily.

A separate table was laid for the newcomers. It was the time of some fast and they were given a dish of sour cabbage. Bezais would have liked some hot meat broth but that was quite out of the question.

"Cattle-food," he muttered under his breath as he dug his spoon into the pot. "Grass. I already feel like mooing and rubbing my back against the wall."

It was late; the moon peeped through the window from high in the sky, and their hosts went off to bed. Spreading straw on the floor, Matveyev noticed that Varya was struggling helplessly with her bootlaces which were sodden and tangled in a tight knot. She put all her soul into the effort to untie them but in vain.

"Let me do it," he said, moved by some strange impulse.

"Oh, don't trouble," she said.

He untied the knots, conscious of Bezais's envious look. Varya thanked him with embarrassing warmth and this involved him in a polite and dull conversation from which he learned that it had been raining the week before at Blagoveshchensk.

"And why did you go to Blagoveshchensk?" he asked casually as he drew his coat over him.

She did not reply at once. Two minutes later when he was already half asleep he heard her say:

"A friend of mine got married there."

That was her tiny little secret which they never learned, then or afterwards—maybe because they never asked her. Varya's friend Katya Peskova, a girl with darting eyes and a snub nose, had married her, Varya's, former fiancé. They had insisted on her coming to the wedding, bombarding her with letters until, at length, she went.

The bridegroom was a friend of her father's and, like him, a mechanic employed on the steamer *Baron Korf*. He was a tall man with dark eyebrows that met at the bridge of his nose and wavy hair above a weather-beaten brow. He used to come only in summer-time, during the navigation season, bringing with him a smell of coal and machine oil. He would walk into the garden, straight and stiff in his brass-buttoned tunic. Varya's mother would go out on to the porch, her father tightening his chest and narrowing blue eyes that thirty years of navigation had paled. Her younger brothers would burst into the room and almost deafen her with the shout:

"Your young man's come."

Varya went on to the porch and kissed him on the brow, pressing her lips to the red line left by his stiff uniform cap. Her mother hurriedly wiped the noses and mouths of her brood with her apron, while her father, with a look for the neighbours peeping through the fence, shook his head and smoothed his white nautical side whiskers.

"Well, time was when I carried as smart a rig as you," he said. All knew, however, that he had always been a little man.

Later they all went into the dining-room. Varya's mother took a velvet-bound album and a big spiky shell that served as an ash-tray from the table and spread a stiff, starchy, white table-cloth. The visitor was offered the sofa with a floral print cover which stood between a barometer and a map of the two hemispheres, and Varya's father had a long talk with him about the river, the fairway and mutual friends. The little boys stood at the door and stared in panic at the visitor with eyes as blue as their father's. Varya's mother clattered plates and glasses on the sideboard and, smiling all over her round face, said:

"Oh, do stop, Dmitry Petrovich. As if he's interested in all you've got to say."

Then Varya's friend went away again. They saw him off from the landing-stage. The huge river gleamed with swiftly-shifting patches of sunlight. Chinese steamers with their five-coloured flags flung clouds of rust-red smoke into the clear sky and left a wake of broad foaming waves. The *Baron Korf* hooted deafeningly, a winch rattled and drew the dripping anchor chain out of the water; Varya's father waved his cap and shouted something to his countless friends on board, while the captain, as if shamming calm among all this hullabaloo, gave his orders to the engine-room through a megaphone. The wind fluttered the republican flag—red with a blue square in one corner—the water seethed and flung up spray under the blows of the huge green paddles, and the two little boys, possessed by an unbearable joy, dashed along the bank and furiously waved straw hats on elastic bands as encouragement to the passengers and crew of the *Baron Korf*. The steamer swung its heavy poop,

up flew the sailing flag—the blue with a white square, handkerchiefs fluttered from the deck, and the *Baron Korf* drew away from the landing-stage, leaving two stiff smooth waves gleaming with rainbow hues of oil. Varya's father took his wife's arm, the little boys put on their hats, slipped the elastic under their chins and set off down the street with their hands in their pockets. Imitating their father they argued gravely that it was high time that damned, pitiful old drake, the captain of the *Baron Korf*, was replaced: at any time he might ground the ship on the shallows near Sretensk. When they turned to the captain's private life and started blaming his wife for her false teeth and for her habit of "wagging her stern," Varya intervened and threatened them with the task of cleaning gooseberries after dinner. Since the moment Varya's friend had turned up the boys had tacitly forgiven her her feminine weaknesses and had even left her tabby cat in peace, although in the depths of their hearts they considered it the most irresponsible of Nature's phenomena.

Then had come that Trinity Sunday, a year ago, when Varya was walking with her young man on the boulevard and they had met Katya Peskova. He treated them both to raspberry ices, demonstrated how to remove a key from a piece of string without untying the knot, and saw them both home. A few days later Varya received from Katya a disjointed letter full of blots and countless mistakes, in which Katya described herself as worthless, shameless and immoral. Within an hour Katya appeared herself, all ink-stains and tears. She declared that life was a sad, a very sad affair, and that the best thing was to die.

"Give him to me," she implored Varya, dashing away her tears. "Anyhow, you're not in love with him."

At first, Varya was even quite angry with her.

"But I do love him," she insisted.

But later on, when Katya showed her the crazy abyss of love in which lay both death and life, doubts and delights—a mad mixture of tears and exclamation marks—she realized that her own love was prosaic and grey and lacking in ardent joy. Varya hesitated for several days and then told Katya that she agreed. Katya could take him, seeing that she could not live without him.

The funny thing about it was that Katya *did* take him. Varya never knew how she had managed to inveigle his simple heart. She felt unhappy for a time, kept a diary and in the evenings walked to a bench on the river-bank where they had first kissed. And then somehow everything was over. And later on, at the wedding in Blagoveshchensk, she had calmly congratulated the young couple, fixed the bride's veil and danced a polka with the mechanic to the wail of a gramophone.

THE HORSEMAN

THE YARD was bathed in the grey light of early morning. Matveyev had pins and needles in one leg. He knew he ought to turn over on his other side but was reluctant to move. He lay still a little longer, trying to doze off again, but finding that he could not, opened his eyes and saw that Varya was already up. She was sitting with the hem of her skirt turned

up, scraping with a knife at some spots of candle wax that had fallen on it. Zhukanov was also astir—he was smearing goose fat on his feet. Matveyev dressed and set about wakening Bezais who stubbornly resisted.

“I don’t care a damn,” he said sleepily and buried his face again.

Matveyev hauled him to his feet and propped him against the wall.

It was cold outside. They felt chilled to the bone as soon as they drove through the gates. There was a wind which raised clouds of light dry snow and played in the horses’ manes. They drove out of the village, passing two creaking windmills. The road climbed a hill. Beyond stretched the forest. Here they were sheltered from the wind and warmed up a little.

The rising sun painted everything a soft dark blue. The trees cast deep shadows; the lighter it grew the further and more clearly they could see into the undergrowth. Some of the trees carried a tangle of wild vine whose dry leaves lay here and there in decorative reddish patches. The runners of the sledge slid noiselessly and evenly over the freshly fallen snow; this induced drowsiness.

Eyes closed, Matveyev listened to Bezais arguing with Zhukanov about what would happen if some scientists invented a way of making gold. Zhukanov was an obstinate man.

“Nothing would happen,” he said. “The man would be arrested and put in gaol to stop him inventing. One man invents something, another thinks of something else—what a state of affairs!”

Then he questioned Bezais about Soviet Russia. Bezais gladly answered him and Matveyev listened with some surprise. All the factories were working; those that were redundant had been closed down. There were food shortages only in the Volga region, elsewhere everything was all right. The trains ran with exemplary punctuality. Bezais was specially enthusiastic about electrification and children's homes where, he said, the children drank cocoa and were dressed like angels. He lied with self-assurance; but Matveyev could not understand why he considered it necessary.

When he raised the point later Bezais told him:

"You see, I had no particular aim. But I'd have found it unpleasant to tell him all sorts of rot about our Republic. After all, he wasn't on our side and his head was stuffed with all kinds of nonsense about human flesh we distributed on ration cards. What I told him didn't do him any harm."

Zhukanov listened to Bezais attentively, nodding his head from time to time. When Bezais had finished he asked:

"And why do you have a hammer and sickle on your coat of arms?"

"It means," said Bezais, "that the working class rules the country in union with the peasantry."

"I see," said Zhukanov with obvious satisfaction. "The workers with the peasantry, eh? And d'you know what the hammer and sickle will end in?"

"No."

"If you write down the two words 'hammer' and 'sickle' and read them backwards, d'you know what it makes?"

Bezais pictured the words in his head and read them backwards. He saw Zhukanov's point.*

"Well, what of that?"

"It must mean something. What's the reason for it?"

"It's stupid."

"No, it's not stupid. It must mean something."

Zhukanov saw in this some special, cryptic significance. He was quite convinced of it and nothing could persuade him otherwise. For him that was more important than all argument.

"It must mean something," he went on significantly. This enraged Matveyev.

Zhukanov exasperated Matveyev with his discourses, and when Bezais began to argue with the man, he could no longer contain himself.

"Shut up, Bezais," he said. "You make my belly ache with your talk. For God's sake, stop anyhow."

He shut his eyes firmly. In an effort to sleep he tried to imagine that the sledge was running in the opposite direction. Zhukanov and Bezais kept quiet for a time but then they began to talk about education. However, he did not hear them out. He woke up several times to straighten his hat which kept slipping to one side. He caught glimpses of trees flashing by, snatches of conversation, and slid back again into his dreams like slipping into warm water. His dream seemed to have no beginning or end—as though he were drifting in a boat along a river, towards a weir

* The Russian words for hammer "*molot*" and for sickle "*serp*," if read backwards, make the word "*prestolom*," which means "in the throne."—*Tr.*

where an enormous mill-wheel was turning. What happened next he did not remember.

He was awakened by the sledge stopping. Zhukanov was talking rapidly to someone in a low tone. Through half-closed eyes Matveyev saw that beside the sledge was a horseman in a military greatcoat and a tall sheepskin hat which he wore pulled low down on his brow.

Still not fully awake, Matveyev cast his eyes slowly over the horseman. The man was tall and his weather-beaten face had Tatar features. The muzzle of short cavalry carbine jutted over his shoulder. He was pointing somewhere with his riding-crop and peering through narrowed eyes which, Matveyev noticed, had a slight squint in them. Matveyev watched the man drowsily, without any particular thought in mind. He wanted to sleep and shut his eyes again. The next time he opened them he saw the cavalryman wheel his horse, rise in the stirrups and flourish his crop. At that moment Matveyev quite clearly saw something he had not noticed before: on the man's shoulder, just where the rifle-strap rested, was a blue strap with two stripes.

At first he was not even surprised. He lay for some minutes watching the back of the departing rider, which soon disappeared round a bend in the road. Then he shut his eyes again wearily. Suddenly he clearly pictured that blue, somewhat crumpled shoulder-strap, the tall sheepskin hat and the high-checkboned face. He felt a slight shiver down his spine. He raised himself slowly and turned to Bezais.

The sledge was at a standstill. The road was hemmed in by tall dark forest trees. Bezais was staring

wide-eyed down the road in the direction the man had ridden away. Zhukanov and Varya looked more surprised than frightened. Matveyev looked at them blankly.

"Who was that?" he asked sternly.

"A Cossack," replied Bezais without animation.

"Where did he turn up from?"

"He was riding along the road. He rode up and stopped us and asked whether it was far to the next village and what it was called."

"Well?"

"That's all. Then he rode on."

Matveyev rubbed his eye with his little finger and reflected.

"That means the Whites have taken Khabarovsk," he said.

He went on pondering. Something had to be done about this straight away but he could not think what.

"Well?" said Bezais.

"This is an infernally nasty business," said Matveyev, pulling out a pencil aimlessly and twiddling it between his fingers. "Infernally nasty, on my word of honour."

"We must push on," he continued. "We're in the position of flies that have fallen into the soup. We can't go back because that would mean crossing the line of the front, and we don't even know where the front is. We must get to Khabarovsk and either wait there until our side returns or go on to the Maritime Region."

"We can't go back," said Bezais, "because we'd easily be caught. It's no fun travelling to and fro in the fighting zone."

"In any case I'm not going back," said Zhukanov suddenly.

"Well, that's fine," said Bezais. "We're going on too."

"But I'm not going on either."

That was quite unexpected.

"Why not?" asked Bezais.

"Because I say so."

"What d'you mean?"

"Just what I said. I'm in charge here, these are my horses. I'll do what I please."

There was an oppressive pause.

"They're not your horses," said Bezais pedantically.

"They belong to the firm of Churin."

"Well, they're not yours, you may be sure of that."

"And where d'you think you're going?"

"Back to the village. To the old man's place where we spent the night."

"What about us?"

"You can go where you please."

They exchanged worried looks.

"That's really very nice of you," said Bezais. "We helped you and now you mean to drop us. Why, it's a swinish trick."

Zhukanov straightened his hat with the end of his whip.

"Of course, it's swinish," he replied calmly. "But I've no intention of sticking my neck out. Any man wants to save his own skin. You are young, you find it funny, but I'm a sick man. If I were arrested I might die."

In his excitement Bezais pulled off his glove and put it on again.

"You won't die," he said. "We must go on, understand that."

"'Must' indeed. That applies to all of us," retorted Zhukanov judiciously. "Strange. Just because I was good-natured enough to give you a lift you want to ride on my back now."

"Stop that, Zhukanov."

"I'm not going on, I told you."

Varya's eyes travelled from Bezais to Matveyev.

"You'll have to get off the sledge," said Zhukanov. "There's nothing doing. I'd be delighted to help you but I can't."

Matveyev got off the sledge.

"Come here, Bezais," he said. "Wait a little, Zhukanov. Just five minutes."

"Five minutes? I can manage that."

They walked a few paces away from the sledge and stopped.

"Well?"

Bezais eyed the road stretching ahead and sighed.

"What's the good of talking?" he said in lowered tones. "We're in a fix, old man."

"A fix?"

"Of course. It's all the same whether we go on or turn back. Let's walk."

"We're not going to walk, we're going to ride," said Matveyev firmly. "We can't walk in the snow in this frost. It's thirty versts to Khabarovsk. How long d'you think it would take us to get there? We must see the last of this road as quickly as possible. I'll take him by the scruff of the neck and shake the life out of him if he refuses to go on."

"What about our papers? Shall we tear them up?"

"We can't do that. How could we prove our identities when we reach our people?"

"Where shall we hide them?"

"In our boots. Or in the sledge."

They walked back to the sledge.

"We'll drive on," said Matveyev, gazing over Zhukanov's head. "You can come with us or walk back to the village. We won't stop you."

Zhukanov looked at them in bewilderment.

"Comrade Bezais," he said, clutching his breast. "And you too, Comrade Matveyev. Don't make fun of me. I'm a sick man. It's enough to make my heart turn over."

"I know, I know," Bezais interrupted as he sat on the sledge. "Your heart turns over and spots dance in front of your eyes like little ants. We've heard all that before."

Almost effortlessly Matveyev grasped Zhukanov by the coat lapels, pushed him to one side and took the reins from his hands. The sledge jerked forward. Zhukanov looked at Matveyev in amazement. He could not understand what had happened.

"But this is highway robbery," he said suddenly. "Give me back the reins. Give them to me, d'you hear?"

He grabbed the reins and pulled them to him with a hysterical shriek. The horses swerved and came to a halt. Matveyev let loose of the reins and Bezais pushed Zhukanov into a corner of the sledge and held him down with all his might. The long ear-flaps of Zhukanov's hat trailed behind the sledge and brushed the snow.

"Let go," said Zhukanov, breathing heavily.

Bezais released him.

"Please try to understand my situation," said Zhukanov quite calmly. "You are Party members. What's going to happen to me if I'm caught with you? They'll kill me. It's one thing for you, but why should I have to suffer? For what ideal?"

"Give us the horses and then you can walk back to the village."

"Give your wife to a stranger. They're not mine, these horses."

"Straighten your hat. You'll lose it."

With a mechanical gesture Zhukanov rescued his dangling ear-flaps, shook the snow off them and put them round his neck. He wiped the bridge of his nose and raised his head. Suddenly his eyes glittered.

"I'm not going on," he shouted so loudly that everyone started. "I'm not, understand? I don't care what you do with me. What right have you to force me to go? You can kill me—but I'm not going on." He was almost screaming now. "Come on, kill me," he said, leaning forward and breathing heavily. "Take my horses. Take my pelts. Take the coat off my back. Maybe you'd like to have my boots too? Take them. Come on, make a clean job of it."

"Don't yell," said Varya nervously. "Someone might hear us."

"Let them," he replied. "Why should I care?"

And suddenly, moustache bristling and face reddening with the effort, he let out a piercing yell:

"Robbery!"

"Damn the man," said Bezais anxiously. "Zhukanov, you're an id-i-ot, a fool. A damned old fool."

"Fool yourself," replied Zhukanov peevishly.

They eyed each other, angry and tense. Matveyev slowly unbuttoned his coat. His hand went to his pocket.

"If you dare to shout again I'll kill you," he said. "And then I'll take you by the legs and throw you off the road."

Zhukanov did not expect this.

"Do you know what could happen to you for saying such things?" he said challengingly.

"I'm stronger than you, and there are two of us. If you don't drive on you'll lose your horses. Anyhow, we'll take them. But if you drive on you'll have your horses and we'll pay you something too. Make up your mind quickly, there's no time to waste."

He could have twisted Zhukanov's neck with one hand, but he preferred not to. Zhukanov took out a handkerchief and blew his nose loudly.

"Very well," he said with dignity. "I give in to physical force. But I shall complain."

His threat gave him a certain satisfaction.

"I shall complain," he repeated.

Matveyev smiled with complete unconcern. He drew a knife and ripped off a piece of the bast covering of the sledge. Then he took out the papers and money, counted the notes, slipped them in the lining and nailed the bast in place.

"Let's be off," he said. "With all speed."

A THOUSAND RUBLES

MATVEYEV tried to think up some plan. They had to do something. But nothing came of his efforts except a decision to remain cool and collected in moments of

danger. He turned this thought over in his mind and examined it from every angle until he noticed that he was whispering to himself and that Bezais was looking at him inquiringly.

"What's on your mind?"

"Oh, I'm thinking about our cursed luck."

"But have you thought what we're going to do?"

This question put Matveyev in a quandary. He was the older of the two: it was his duty to give a precise reply.

"First of all," he said, "there's no need to worry. That's the main thing, I think."

Bezais at once took offence.

"Who's worrying?" he said hotly. "Perhaps you think I am?"

"Did I say so?"

"Then what are you talking about? Just making conversation, eh?"

"Look here, shut up, will you? You pick on every word."

Bezais shrugged.

"I don't like it."

"All right, then, I was speaking about myself. It's me who's worried. Does that satisfy you?"

"Completely," said Bezais.

The worst thing was not the fact that they might be caught and killed. It was far worse waiting for that to happen. In his childhood Matveyev had played a game in which one boy sat on the floor with his eyes shut while the rest struck him light blows on the forehead. They did not strike straight away, only after a few minutes interval. No one could stand it for long: it was impossible to sit with your eyes shut wait-

ing for the blow. Mátveyev felt relieved when, at last, they ran into the Whites again.

It was already noon; every minute they expected to see a company of soldiers with white-banded hats appear round a bend in the road. Bezais who was overwhelmed with a nervous talkativeness was telling stories of all kinds of unheard-of nonsense. Varya seemed calm, and again it occurred to Matveyev that the girl had no imagination: "Brainless people rarely worry." Why he considered her brainless and narrow-minded he did not know himself.

As time passed Matveyev grew tired from the strain of waiting for danger and he fell into a mood of indifference. When in the distance he saw a military vehicle approaching, drawn by two horses, he accepted it as a fact and paid no particular heed to it.

"Whites," said Bezais.

"Uh-huh," he replied.

It was a field kitchen, a two-wheeled vehicle painted a muddy green. A smoky, loose-fitting chimney shook and rattled on the top, the high wheels were covered up to the axle-hubs with old autumn mud. Some iron object, rolling about inside the boiler, clattered loudly as the vehicle ran on. A fur-hatted soldier swayed on the driver's seat, the bayonet behind his shoulders describing a circle with every jolt. The soldier waved at them and Zhukanov stopped the horses.

"Is it far to Zhirkhovka?" the soldier asked.

"No distance," said Zhukanov. "Carry straight on, quite straight, and then, when you reach the stones, you'll find a road running right and left. If you take the road to the right it'll bring you to Zhirkhovka."

"How many versts is it from here?"

"Not more than five, I think."

The soldier rubbed his frozen cheeks.

"Maybe a bit less, eh? Maybe three versts?"

"Yes, maybe three," said Zhukanov. "Who knows? The road hasn't been measured. Yes, maybe only three. Why, of course, three!"

Matveyev thought the soldier was going to drive on but he slipped down from his seat and waved his hands to warm them.

"Look here," he said to Zhukanov, "d'you have any bread?"

"Yes."

"Give me a bite."

"Good heavens, yes," exclaimed Zhukanov. "Why, certainly, don't mention it. I was in the army myself, sweated three years in a sapper battalion. Take something to eat, do. Who would stint a soldier bread?" he went on, opening a basket and taking out a loaf wrapped in a piece of newspaper. "Some ham, maybe? Help yourself to the ham."

"Aye, let's have some ham too," said the soldier as he took the food. "Maybe, you'll find me something to smoke?"

"I'm very sorry but I'm a nonsmoker," said Zhukanov apologetically. "My health doesn't permit me to smoke."

"What?"

"I'm in poor health, I said. My chest can't stand tobacco smoke. I don't smoke. But here are some sunflower seeds—they're roasted."

Bezais offered the soldier a cigarette. He inhaled the smoke greedily.

Matveyev examined the man. He was wearing a new light-brown greatcoat. The coat fitted him badly; the cloth warped like cardboard and jutted out sharply at every fold; the strap at the back, drawn in by the leather belt, stood out uncouthly. The soldier had a weather-beaten snub-nosed face; he kept blinking his eyes which were red from sleeplessness. Removing his rifle he stood it against a wheel and began to scratch himself everywhere—his arm-pits, inside his collar, behind the knees. He could not get his hand to his back so he rubbed it against the cart.

"Biting hard?" asked Zhukanov.

"Like beasts."

"When did you take Khabarovsk?"

"Three days back."

"How's the road now? Quiet? Is it safe to drive?"

"What are you afraid of?"

"Oh, you never know. Partisans, maybe. Or the Reds might attack. You might fall into the middle of it and not get out again. That's what I'm scared of driving into."

The soldier climbed up to his seat again, covered his feet and tucked his coat round his legs to keep out the draughts.

"D'you know?" went on Zhukanov. "I think I'll drive with you. I really am afraid to go on. I'll go back to the village and wait a day or two there until things settle down and then I'll move on to Khabarovsk. Will you let me drive along with you, soldier?"

"Why should I mind?" said the soldier. "It's a public road."

"What about us?" said Bezais, grasping Zhukanov's arm.

Zhukanov calmly freed himself.

"You can walk. It's not far to Khabarovsk, you'll soon make it. You're young, not like me. I'm not thinking of myself, as a matter of fact. I'm worried about the horses. What if they're requisitioned?"

"But this puts us in the hell of a fix."

"Don't swear. There's nothing unusual about this."

"Are you going to be long?" asked the soldier. "I must be leaving."

"But listen, Zhukanov. Please drop it."

"Why should I drop it?"

"Drive on...."

"Why should I? I'm not going on, I told you."

Bezais forced a smile and glanced at Matveyev who sat looking pale and depressed as he faced Zhukanov.

"All right," Matveyev said in a low voice. "We'll walk. But drive a little farther down the road so that we can get our papers and money."

"What money?" asked Zhukanov loudly. "D'you mean that five rubles you gave me? Take it back, please, I don't want anybody else's money. Take back your money."

"Be quiet, please," said Bezais, trying hard to smile and tripping over the words. "The money ... a thousand rubles ... and our papers. Please."

Zhukanov turned to the soldier who had been watching the scene with interest.

"Pure comedy," said Zhukanov, spreading his hands and smiling. "They're asking me for some papers or other. Funny people. I'm sorry I had anything to do with them. Go in peace and leave me alone. I won't touch you and don't you touch me."

"What papers?" asked the soldier. "What are you talking about?"

"Zhukanov," muttered Matveyev almost in a whisper. "Let me take the money without him noticing it and we'll let you go. Stop playing this game. D'you hear, Zhukanov?"

"You'd better be off as you are," Zhukanov said quietly. "Leave while you're safe. You think about your necks, not about money. The money will find someone to look after it."

"Look here, Zhukanov," Matveyev said menacingly.

"I'm a man of forty-eight, young fellow. You'd better show some respect when you talk to me. Get off my sledge. D'you hear? Just see what's going on here, good soldier? These people who haven't any identification papers to show who they are had the cheek to hop on to my sledge and now they won't get off."

"Matveyev ... my friend ... look, for heaven's sake," Varya gabbled, her voice full of entreaty and fear. "Let's go, as quickly as we can. I beg you, do ... please stop this...."

Her last words he sensed from her trembling lips rather than heard:

"They might kill us...."

"I'm leaving, Matveyev," said Bezais, getting up and reaching for the haversacks. "Let's go."

Matveyev looked at him with glum obstinacy.

"I'm not going without the money," he said, paling, and frightening himself with his own words. "You can go. You too, Varya."

"Idiot," said Bezais and sat down again. "Damned idiot."

They heard a heavy thud behind them—the soldier had jumped down and released the safety catch of his rifle. He jerked in a mass of little movements and

his rather simple face glowed with zeal. The fool might even shoot, thought Matveyev with alarm.

The soldier's new boots squeaked as he came up to the sledge. He hesitated a moment, trying to recall something, then rapidly, as on the training ground, brought his rifle to the ready and thrust one foot forward.

"Who are you?" he said sternly. "Haven't you any papers?"

"No," replied Matveyev humbly.

"I have," cried Zhukanov, hurriedly producing a wallet and rummaging in it. "Passport, birth certificate and a certificate from my place of employment, from the Churin store. Look at them, please. But they haven't got theirs, that is, maybe they have something, but they've hidden them."

"Uh-huh...."

The soldier stood for a few moments, quivering with excitement. Then he brought the butt of his rifle down to his foot with several neat moves and a smart click of the heels. They all watched him without understanding what he was up to. The soldier circled the sledge excitedly. Suddenly, he bounded back a few paces, shouldered arms and cried with naïve joy:

"Now I'm going to shoot you."

Matveyev's head shrunk into his shoulders. The soldier's impetuosity scared him. The man was young, had probably only recently read the service regulations and was now burning with ardour to fulfil his duty as efficiently as possible.

The soldier brought down his rifle and came to the sledge again. He was evidently turning something over in his mind.

"Quiet," he shouted in an unnatural voice. "You, ugly mug! Who are you, eh? What? Quiet! Why haven't you any papers? What's this wench doing here?"

"She ..."

"Quiet."

Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead.

"I ..." he said in a breaking voice, "I ..."

He concentrated on chewing his thick lips.

"Don't dare to start talking, don't spin any of your yarns. You're under arrest. About turn. I'm going to take you to headquarters. They'll show you how to drive."

Altogether at a loss, Bezais looked at the man's freckled face.

"What are you talking about?" he said in bewilderment. "We must go home...."

"No lip from you."

"But allow me ... allow me ..." began Matveyev.

"I won't allow you anything."

"But ..."

He did not at once realize what had happened. He heard a ringing sound in his ear. His teeth chattered.

"Got it?" he heard.

He raised his head; the soldier was looking at him with barely concealed delight. He had boxed Matveyev's ear. Matveyev felt his right cheek glowing hotly.

An old habit awoke in him and he clenched his fists involuntarily. When anyone hit him he repaid with interest.

Why was he gaping at the fellow, he asked himself in surprise. And at that moment he suddenly noticed how weather-beaten and chilled was the soldier's face,

how clumsily his shoddy greatcoat hung on him with the belt all awry. Only a minute before he had been afraid of the man, seeing him as a soldier, but now he saw him as a simple village lout, rather comic and absurd as he stood there holding his rifle like a broomstick. After all, the man was only a cook, a mere auxiliary, he reflected and felt a sting of shame.

Matveyev stood up, looked down at the soldier from his superior height and struck him a blow between the eyes. The soldier crashed down on to the snow. Matveyev stooped and tore the rifle from his hand, recovered the man's hat and jammed it back on his head.

"Be off with you, you fool," he said angrily. "Or I'll give you such a hiding that you won't be able to stand on your feet."

The soldier got up slowly and looked about him. His clothes were crumpled and smeared with snow. All the excitement had gone out of his small eyes; he muttered something as he fingered his ripening bruise, and stretched his right hand out as though defending himself from another blow. Matveyev looked at his pitiful face and turned away contemptuously. It was high time they were on their way.

Without a glance at the others he laid the rifle on the sledge. With petty obstinacy Zhukanov kept his foot on the sledge, barring Matveyev's way. Matveyev grasped the top of Zhukanov's boot between two fingers and moved his foot aside.

"Give me back my rifle," he heard the soldier say behind his back. Hands lowered, the man looked at him with a strained face.

"I'll not give it you."

"Give it to me."

"I won't, you dud. Stop your whining."

Matveyev sat on the sledge. The soldier rubbed the bridge of his nose anxiously.

"Starting a fight like that!" he said, snivelling. "Won't let a man even speak to him. What a fellow!"

"Shut up."

"What have I said? Hitting a man like that! Give me the rifle. It's not mine. It's army property...."

Bezais whipped up the horses. For a moment or two the soldier stood still, then he tore off after the sledge.

"Give it back."

He stumbled and fell. His hat flew off his head. Getting up, he ran on hatless, limping on one leg.

"Give it back."

"To hell with him, the mule," said Matveyev. "Making all this din."

He turned and shook his fist, but the soldier continued to run after them. His pink scalp showed through his close-cropped hair. He fell once more.

"Give it back to him," said Varya.

Matveyev picked up the rifle, removed the bolt and tossed the useless thing on to the road. He saw the soldier come up to the rifle, examine it and then walk back trailing it by the bayonet. The wind raised the hem of his coat. When he had gone out of sight Matveyev flung the bolt away. It thudded against a tree and dropped into the snow.

A MATTER OF EXPEDIENCY

THEY went down a hill and reached level ground. The horses grew lazy and Bezais whipped them on again. Zhukanov leaned over to him and took the reins from his hands.

"You'll overheat the horses that way. There's a right and a wrong way of doing everything. You've got to know how," he said sternly.

Zhukanov looked quite offended. He had already recovered his composure. His face expressed severity. Bezais glanced at Matveyev questioningly and gave the reins to Zhukanov.

"Turn off the road here," said Matveyev, indicating a narrow track running straight into the forest.

Zhukanov measured Matveyev with his eye.

"We can't go down there," he said.

"What?"

"I tell you we can't turn down there. It doesn't lead anywhere. It's just a woodcutters' track."

"Do as I tell you."

Zhukanov turned the horses. The sledge ran into the undergrowth, brushing aside young firs. The branches touched their faces and shoulders. Bezais felt like asking why they had left the main road but after their encounter with the White soldier Matveyev had grown in his estimation and now he trusted him implicitly.

They drove about half a verst before Matveyev told Zhukanov to stop. Climbing down from the sledge he said:

"Come here, Bezais."

Bezais rose obediently. Zhukanov watched them with a puzzled look on his face.

"We'll be back in a minute, Varya," said Matveyev. "Take the revolver and keep an eye on him"—he nodded at Zhukanov. "See he doesn't run away."

Zhukanov grew uneasy when he saw Varya take the revolver and finger the cock and chambers inexpertly.

"Wait a minute," he said, eyeing the girl nervously. "Tell her not to point that revolver at me. She doesn't know how to handle it. She might fire it accidentally."

From Varya's expression it was evident that she too was afraid that might happen. But Matveyev took Bezais by the arm and led him on quickly. When they were out of sight of the others he stopped.

"Well?"

"You've done fine," said Bezais, looking at Matveyev with undisguised happiness.

Matveyev dropped his eyes.

"That was nothing," he said. "The main thing is to remain cool and collected. That's all."

"You behaved splendidly," Bezais continued. "I must say, I never expected it of you. I'm absolutely delighted, I really am."

He thought for a moment and added generously:

"I doubt whether I could have got out of a situation like that so neatly."

"Oh; it's not worth talking about," Matveyev demurred. "You behaved very well too. But now we've got to hurry. At any moment someone might find that cook on the road. If the report reaches Khabarovsk before we get there we're bound to be caught. We must get to Khabarovsk just as quickly as possible."

"Then why did we stop? Why did you pull off into the forest?"

"Why? What about Zhukanov?"

Bezais reflected.

"True," he said. "What a swine he is. Have you noticed those veins on his hands?"

"We can't just leave him behind. He'd report us the moment he got a chance."

"We could throw him off the sledge and drive on."

"But he knows our names and faces."

Bezais looked at Matveyev.

"We must get rid of him," said Matveyev and fell silent.

"What are you thinking of doing?"

"He has to be eliminated."

"But how?"

"Oh, somehow."

They looked at each other dubiously.

"Maybe he won't betray us," Bezais said uncertainly. "After all, he only wanted to get the money. Now he's scared."

Matveyev thought for a little.

"He's a fool, simply a fool. He's more of a fool than a money-grubber. No, we daren't risk it. He's capable of any trick. If he doesn't give us away, so much the better. But if he does?"

Bezais rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"All right," he said. "I agree."

"Should we do it straight away?" Matveyev asked rather solemnly.

"Of course."

"Right here?"

"Well, we could. It's all the same."

Bezais's compliance struck Matveyev as being rather strange.

"Maybe you think I'm going to do all this?" he said suspiciously.

Bezais jumped. He snapped a twig off the cedar they were standing under. A light silvery dust whirled in the air.

"Why, yes, old man," he said, raising the twig to his lips in his embarrassment. "I wanted to ask you about that. I can't do it, word of honour."

"You can't? But I can? Is that what you mean?"

"No, seriously. I know how to shoot, of course. But this is something quite different. Why, we drank out of the same cup with the fellow this morning. Really, this is something quite different. This is ... why, this is ..."

"You damned flop." Matveyev spat out angrily. "You ought to be sitting next to your mummy drinking tea and eating cream cakes."

Bezais smiled feebly. What Matveyev was proposing was the simplest and most convenient thing they could do, yet he was revolted by the idea of it. He looked down mechanically at the naïve little fir saplings sticking out of the snow like five-pointed stars. His mind was in a vague ferment of pity and disgust.

"It's unpleasant to shoot a man with a bald head," he said, trying to convey his thoughts.

"So you refuse. Maybe you'd like me to call Varya and let her take your place?"

"Oh, stop it. Believe me, if it were a question of fighting I wouldn't say a word."

"I'll tell you this," said Matveyev. "There's a foul type of men who always try to keep their hands clean. They'll take on anything so long as someone else does the dirty side of the job. They're longing to be heroes and do something extraordinary and brilliant, some feat or other. I know the sort. You can't get them to write a short notice about a general meeting because they want to write a fat scientific book. They

won't volunteer to chop wood because they'd rather blow up armoured trains. They're useless, because a man only gets a chance of performing a great feat once in his life but there's dirty work to be done every day. I suppose I've offended you?"

Bezais had felt offended long ago but he kept quiet.

"Maybe you think I've been specially trained to kill people?" said Matveyev.

"May I ask," said Bezais, "why you, a man of strict discipline, have dumped this dirty job on to me? I'm moved almost to tears by your reflections, but why don't you want to do it yourself?"

Matveyev shuddered.

"I'm not refusing to do it," he said. "But to tell the truth I don't want to take it on. It's not that I'm afraid to—it's nothing. I'm not afraid, I just don't want to do it. What if we do it together? It's not a job for one."

Bezais said nothing.

"But if you do refuse, then, of course, I'll manage without you."

Bezais raised his eyes. He felt that if he refused he would never forgive himself.

"I'm not refusing," he said. "Let's do it together."

They walked side by side back to the sledge. Bezais wore a fixed frown on his face and tried to make himself feel angry. He recalled every detail about Zhukanov, his face and the way he had behaved with the soldier. An eye for an eye, he told himself. It had to be so. But he felt too tired to be angry. Then he tried to persuade himself that Zhukanov was really only a pawn, a mere nothing. What loss would it be to hu-

manity if this man were to die in a few minutes time? In the long run everyone dies. He would die himself, and so would Matveyev and Varya.

He caught sight of the horses and the sledge through the trees. He heard Zhukanov say:

"You're too young to teach me, young lady. And I'm too old to be re-educated. You mentioned money. God preserve me from taking anyone else's money. But it isn't your money, after all. It's Party money. That means it belongs to no one...."

"What d'you mean by that?"

"What I said. To no one. Who owns it? Tell me his name. What's his address? It's stray money, no one keeps count of it, no one's interested in it."

Matveyev and Bezais walked towards the sledge. Varya held the revolver as if it were a poisonous spider, and seemed to be depressed by her responsibility. She felt silly holding a revolver and was glad to hand it back to Matveyev.

Zhukanov was grimly derisive.

"As you see, I didn't run away," he said. "There was no need for you to worry. I'll not leave my horses."

He expected a reply. But Matveyev said nothing.

"Anyway, why should I run away?" Zhukanov resumed. "I haven't robbed anyone, I haven't killed anyone. My papers are in order. There are some people, now, who haven't got any papers and who are on the run. Or who make trouble and then run away. But why should I run away?"

"Come here, Zhukanov," said Matveyev.

"Where?"

"Come here a minute."

"What for?"

"You'll find out."

Zhukanov reflected.

"No, tell me why."

"I have some business to settle with you."

For some moments they looked at each other without moving. Then Zhukanov rose and walked towards the two young men. He looked questioningly from one to the other.

They let him walk ahead, following him at a few paces. Holding his breath, Bezais slipped his hand into his pocket, took out his revolver and raised it to eye level.

He felt no pity for Zhukanov. He had only one thought in his mind and it tormented him: that Zhukanov might turn round, see the revolver and realize what was happening. He was afraid of the man's scream, of his imploring eyes, his hands clutching the edge of his coat. At that moment Zhukanov turned. Bezais fired instantly.

He felt the revolver jump in his hand. He heard the almost instantaneous report of Matveyev's revolver. A big grey crow broke away from a tree and flew off, its wings flapping evenly. Zhukanov slumped to one side. As he fell his hands clutched convulsively at a tree. Then his body slid down the trunk and lay on the snow.

"That's that," said Matveyev.

They waited a few minutes. Zhukanov did not move. Then they walked gingerly round the body and looked at it from the front. The dead face wore a stern expression. Through the half-shut eyelids the whites of the eyes showed. There was no blood.

Holding his revolver, Matveyev knelt and unbuttoned Zhukanov's coat. There were two blood-stained patches in the chest, one near the throat, the other near the left shoulder. Matveyev put his hand into one of the side pockets and brought out a leather wallet containing papers.

They hurried back. Varya met them with silence. She looked at them hard and lowered her eyes.

"Be quick," shouted Bezais as he sprang on to the sledge and picked up the reins. He struck the horses and the sledge moved.

"Did you kill him?" Varya asked.

"We did," said Bezais tersely.

They drove back to the road. Bezais stopped the horses and Matveyev walked ahead.

"Did he suffer?" Varya asked.

"No," said Bezais. "He collapsed like a sack of shavings. I hit him over the heart, in the shoulder," he added.

Varya flinched. Her face was pinched, her hair stuck out untidily under her hat. She looked at Bezais helplessly.

"I can't understand how you could do it," she said, turning away. "Killing a man! Aren't you sorry you killed him?"

"No."

"Not the least bit?"

Bezais turned to her sharply.

"Leave me alone. What d'you want of me? All right, we killed him. What are you nagging about?"

He clearly recalled that narrow track, the utter silence of the forest and the heel of Zhukanov's boot with the big nails in it. He felt a wave of physical re-

vulsion and in an attempt to smother the picture he said quickly and challengingly:

"As if it were of any importance. One man less in the world. It had to be done. He got what he deserved. People like him have to be killed."

He faltered and went on:

"Are you sorry for him? Maybe we should have let him go anywhere he wanted. The idea of it! We killed him, and that's that. One scoundrel less in the world."

"Stop that," said Varya.

Matveyev returned.

"The road's clear," he said. "We can go."

A BONE FRACTURE

IT WAS already dark when they reached the outskirts of Khabarovsk. The sky was spangled with big stars; in the west the setting sun had left a broad lilac belt.

They drove through a stretch of thinly-wooded country on to high ground from where a view of the town opened before them unexpectedly. After the narrow uneven road and the dark forest the town looked enormous. A dim glow hung over it; the lights of street windows gleamed chain-like in the dusk. Beyond the town curved the broad belt of a snow-clad river, and in the dark-blue light they could clearly distinguish the delicate lacework of the huge, twelve-span Amur Bridge. The big square windows of the electric power station glowed red. Even at this distance the town created a feeling of bustling life, shuffling footsteps and the warm breathing of its crowds.

"We're there," said Matveyev, to break the silence.

Bezais leaned over the side of the sledge and looked at the town eagerly. To him Khabarovsk was something abstract and unreal—a black circle on the map. Now it rocked beneath him in patches of light—a big town full of live people.

“Look, there, on the right, runs the boulevard,” said Varya, straining her neck. “And further on, along the embankment, behind that big chimney, see—that’s our house. Oh, I wonder how Mummy is getting on?”

Bezais saw neither boulevard nor chimney.

How were *they* going to get on, he asked himself mechanically.

He turned to Matveyev and caught his eye. Matveyev was leaning against the back of the sledge, studiously nibbling a piece of straw. Behind him the jagged tops of a sparse growth of trees stood out black against the sky.

“This is a cheap trick,” said Matveyev with a grimace. “If they suspect even for a second that there’s anything wrong, we’re lost. Idiotic! Who’s going to take me for a man of forty-eight? It’s a kid’s game.”

Bezais tossed the reins aside abruptly and pushed his hat on to the back of his head. They were in a real fix.

“But what else can we do?” he asked in a quiet apologetic tone. “I don’t like the idea myself, old man. But it’s our only chance.”

He raised his head and sighed heavily. They would have to take this too in their stride.

“All right, but what if . . .”

“Well, if . . .”

And, on second thought, added: “We’ll all be there, anyway.”

"Where?" asked Varya in a quiet frightened voice.

She was so scared that she looked quite comic with her chalk-white pallor. Bezais felt conscience-stricken at the thought that he might be looking the same way.

"Oh, there's nothing to worry about," he said. "I think everything will work out all right. Besides, I've noticed that the Whites' sentry service is pretty bad. The sentries run off to drink tea and sleep. We'll manage somehow."

Matveyev yawned convulsively.

"Ye-e-s," he said vaguely.

He pulled another straw and began nibbling it as he searched his mind. Then he realized that he was simply playing for time, trying to put off that last minute which had already started. He threw the straw away and said hurriedly:

"Well, let's be off."

At once the sledge began to slide quietly down the hill, its sides bumping against snow-drifts. The lights of the town swam on one side, winked through the black twigs and disappeared for a second—again they saw only the starlit night, the snow, the quiet woods. Matveyev hurriedly lit a cigarette and glanced at his watch.

"Quarter to nine," he said.

The lights of Khabarovsk reappeared round the hillside. Matveyev looked at them casually and suddenly remembered that somewhere down there, in one of those houses, lived Lisa. It had been on a night like this, when he and Lisa had roamed the Chita streets, holding hands and chattering nonsense. For one reason or another he had not thought of her during the past few days—perhaps because he had been too busy

or because thoughts of women and love were out of place when one was crossing a forest in the frost. Now his memories of Lisa were fanned by the danger lurking down there at the foot of the hill, and they fired his blood. The town no longer seemed so strange a place.

"Bezais," he said, "are you listening? If they stop us and try to keep us from going on, whip up the horses. To hell with them! We'll make a dash for it, that's all."

"All right."

Make a dash for it, Matveyev repeated to himself. He found comfort in the phrase. After all, it made things easier to think there was still a way out.

Now the town was nearer, running up to meet them; they began to distinguish separate houses. They saw the low roofs of suburban houses, bird-boxes on poles and long kitchen gardens. The darkness deepened. Far ahead, at the end of the street, a lonely street-lamp beckoned.

"It'll start soon," said Matveyev, putting a hand to his pocket. "Come on, Bezais, keep a good grip on the reins."

A few more moments passed.

"There, on the right," Bezais suddenly whispered excitedly. "That's the sentry post."

"I can see it all right," Matveyev answered quietly.

On the right stood a small house with lighted windows. Heavy snow-drifts hung from its low roof. A few birch-trees bent their heads in a little front garden. Even from a distance they noticed a dark figure on the road, opposite the house. They drove nearer and caught the glint of the bayonet jutting above the man's

shoulder. They heard a shout; although Bezais had been expecting it for a long time it made him start involuntarily.

"Halt," the sentry said quietly.

Bezais reined the horses to a stop.

"Who goes there?"

The sentry wore an enormous sheepskin that reached to the ground. It drowned him completely: only the top of his fur hat emerged from above the collar.

"Friends," replied Bezais, using the conventional phrase.

"Who are you?"

"Local people. Khabarovsk folk."

Silence followed. Bezais heard quiet voices ahead. Footsteps crunched on the snow. "Well, what are you looking at?" he heard someone say. A man carrying a lamp came out of the gate and a yellow light swayed on the snow.

"Who are you?" another voice asked.

"Khabarovsk folk," Matveyev said.

There was more talk in front of the sledge. Bezais caught scraps of it but could understand nothing. His heart beat fast, hollowly. Would it come soon, he thought gloomily.

A door slammed and someone came out on to the porch. All that could be seen of him were his boots caught in a beam of light. The fence cast deep black shadows on the snow.

"Well?" the man on the porch asked in a loud voice. Voices explained the situation to him.

"Call Matusenko," the man went on. "Who are you?"

"We're Khabarovsk folk."

A chain rattled behind the gate. A dog barked. The horses stood with their heads down.

"Where have you come from now?"

"From Zhirkhovka. Please let us through."

The gate opened with a creak.

"Drive the horses into the yard. You can't enter the town before morning."

"But we live here," shouted Matveyev. "I have my papers, everything is in order. Please let us drive on."

They heard the man on the porch yawn.

"You can't enter the town without the permission of the commandant," he said. "You'll have to spend the night here."

"We can't."

"There's nothing I can do about it. Bring in the horses."

Bezais leaned over to Matveyev.

"Well?" he asked.

"Wait," whispered Matveyev, and then in a loud voice, unconsciously imitating Zhukanov:

"Please be so kind as to let us through. I'm a sick man, I can't spend the night here. And they're expecting us at home."

There was no immediate reply. Someone laughed.

"You'll not peg out here," someone said.

"Drive on, fast," said Matveyev, barely audible.

Bezais took a deep breath, stood up and waved his whip. The sledge jerked, flinging him back. He bumped his chin painfully but at once scrambled on to his knees and used the whip again. He saw the lamp and the dark figures of the men flash by. He heard shouts behind him but did not catch the words. Lumps of snow flew into the sledge. Standing at his full height

he whipped the horses blindly on their backs and sides.

Someone ran straight to meet the horses, shouting and waving his arms. He leaped aside at the last minute and the sledge shot past, just missing him.

A shot rang out behind them. Bezais ducked instinctively. He had the impression that the bullet flew near his temple, touching a lock of his hair. There was another shot.

"My God!" he heard Varya exclaim.

The street seemed endlessly long. The houses leaped and thrust their dark piles forward to meet them. The shots rang deafeningly in their ears. A dog sprang from a gateway and ran after the sledge, barking frenziedly. Bezais stared ahead towards the cross-roads where there would be an opportunity of turning a corner. Would they make it?

"Bezais."

The voice sounded muffled, like on the telephone. It took him a long time to realize he was being addressed.

The cross-roads were near. Bezais held the reins so hard that his arms were numbed up to the elbows. He leaned forward with only one thought in his head: they must press on and get round that corner. Would they be able to shake off that dog?

He pulled the reins sharply at the corner and the sledge made an abrupt turn, heeling over on its side. Bezais gripped the front board, expecting to be flung into the snow at any moment. But a second later the sledge was running down a dark street.

A white cloud of dust smote his face and the air whistled about his ears. Snorting as they ran, the

horses pounded the smooth road hard with their hoofs. The whole of life was concentrated in that swift movement. Afterwards, Bezais vaguely recalled that they turned down several lanes, went up and then down a hill, past a church and a long wooden fence above which trees raised bare boughs. Several times he heard someone shouting at him but he paid no heed. The horses changed to a trot, though Bezais went on whipping them mechanically. He raised his hand to his chin and found that it was hurting. He must have bruised it on the front of the sledge, he thought.

"Bezais," he heard. "Stop, for heaven's sake. Are you crazy?"

Bezais slowly collected his wits. Only then did he notice that he had lost his hat. His brow and cheeks were quite damp with snow and sweat.

"What's the matter with you? I can't get a word out of you. Take a look at Matveyev. Quick, for heaven's sake."

Bezais mopped his brow.

"What's the matter with him?" he asked, fingering his crumpled hat that lay at his feet and putting it on again. "Why are you shouting? Speak quietly."

He stopped the horses and struck a match. For a few moments he looked around aimlessly, trying to make out what had happened. He suddenly remembered Zhukanov. Matveyev's face was pale; he was biting his lips. He sat clutching the side of the sledge with his left hand, his head flung back and turned to one side. Bezais caught his breath. Had they killed him?

"Matveyev," he called quietly.

Matveyev did not reply. Bezais lifted his arm; it hung limply. Suddenly he noticed that Matveyev's left leg was bleeding. He lit another match. The blood was flowing freely below the knee, near the foot. Something white protruded through the torn cloth—at first Bezais thought it was a bit of Matveyev's underpants. A few straws were stuck to the blood. Suddenly he saw with agonizing clarity that the piece of white was a fractured bone—sharp and oval-shaped, with an uneven edge. His heart turned over. Varya was shocked by the blank look on his face.

"Is he alive?" she asked.

Bezais lifted Matveyev's arm again and felt for his pulse. On the pavement opposite a man stopped, stood for a moment and walked on.

"Well?" Varya asked.

He could not find the pulse. He tried hard to remember the first-aid rules. At that moment Matveyev's fingers stirred feebly. Bezais carefully lowered his arm.

"Well?" repeated Varya. "Is he dead? Why don't you say something, Bezais?"

"He's alive all right," said Bezais. "Do you know the address of a good doctor? The best, the most expensive doctor."

"There's a good doctor on the Embankment. He attended Auntie Sonya. But drive quickly, Bezais, do. Is he really alive, Bezais?"

"Of course, he is."

He began to turn the horses. Suddenly Varya remembered that the doctor who lived on the Embankment was a lung specialist.

"You fool," said Bezais angrily.

"I'm quite out of my wits. Wait," she said, pressing her hands to her temples. "What sort of doctor do you need? What do you call him?"

"A surgeon."

"A surgeon? Just a minute, just a minute. Wait, I'll think of one straight away." She shut her eyes hard and rocked her head.

Bezais watched her impatiently.

"How long are you going to be? Is there anything but sawdust in your head?"

"Wait a minute," she implored him. "I'm trying to remember but I can't think of anyone. A surgeon?"

Bezais waited, kicking his heels impatiently. At that moment he hated the girl. They had to hurry, there wasn't a moment to lose and there she was sitting, unable to remember. All his love for her had vanished—he felt like boxing her ears.

"He's losing blood while you're sitting here," he cried. "He might die, d'you understand."

She said nothing.

"You dolt," he groaned.

Varya's shoulders shook. She was crying.

"I . . . can't . . . remember . . . a thing," she said through her sobs. "My head's going round. Is he still alive?"

Bezais sprang on to the sledge and grasped the reins.

"Listen," said Varya, wiping away her tears. "Does a surgeon give you smallpox inoculations?"

"Where is the nearest chemist's shop?"

"Straight on and to the right. Don't go too fast, you're jolting him terribly."

The street ran straight ahead for a long way. A soft light spilled through the window shutters of the houses. The sky was still clear and the big low stars emitted a cold glow.

THE PROFESSIONAL APPROACH

COATS of all description bulged from hooks in the hall. Someone was playing a stirring march on the piano in the next room. Bezais caught a glimpse of his own face in the mirror for the first time in several months. The bruise on his chin and the tufts of hair sticking out untidily from under his hat made him look so peculiar that he had some difficulty in recognizing himself. He took off his hat and was smoothing down his hair with his hand when the doctor came into the hall.

"You want to see me?"

"Oh, doctor, please.... There's been an accident: my brother has been wounded. I'll pay you well if you'll only help me."

He was afraid the doctor would be annoyed and turn down the case.

"I wouldn't have troubled you but he's very badly wounded," he went on, forcing a smile and casting the doctor an imploring look.

"But these are not my consulting hours. Why didn't you take him to the hospital?"

"I'm a stranger in the town. I don't know the place. I was sent to you."

The doctor took out a toothpick and picked his teeth. He was thinking.

"Who sent you to me?"

"The chemist's. They told me you were the best surgeon."

The march on the piano came to an end. Chairs were shifted. Bezais waited uneasily for an answer, watching every movement of the doctor's eyelids.

Much depended on this stocky doctor with the jaundiced face. In his parched white fingers trembled the fate of a man bleeding to death.

The doctor played with his seal.

"Very well, bring him in."

Bezais ran outside. Flinging an arm over Matveyev's shoulders he lifted him as carefully as he could. He stooped and placed Matveyev's arm round his own neck.

"Hold him by the waist, Varya."

He managed to lift Matveyev and moved to the door, swaying under the weight of the helplessly sagging body.

"You'll fall, Bezais," cried Varya.

He mounted the stairs, feeling his way with his feet. At the top, holding a candle, stood a maid in a neat apron. She looked at Matveyev with undisguised curiosity. By the time he reached the hall, Bezais felt quite exhausted. He was afraid he was going to fall together with his burden.

"Where shall I take him?" he asked, panting.

Women's faces peered at the door. A little girl with a pink ribbon in her hair stared hard at him.

Bezais staggered into a small study and, completely exhausted, laid Matveyev on a leather-upholstered sofa. The doctor removed his jacket and said something to the maid.

"Take your coat off," said the doctor, slipping into a smock. "You're not afraid of blood, are you? Wash your hands."

The room had that old, composite smell of a place that has been kept warm for years. On the writing-desk picture postcards of marine views lay heaped, well-bitten pencils were scattered about, there was a skull whose sawn sections were held together by copper hooks, a bust of Tolstoi and some huge books. Above the desk hung a picture of a tabby playing with a ball of wool. The gilt bindings of several rows of books glittered faintly behind the glass of the bookcase.

The maid brought in a spirit-stove and a pan of water, trundled in a white iron table and pulled down a big lamp from the ceiling. Bezais washed his hands, his eyes on the doctor.

Of short build, narrow-shouldered, angular in his gestures, the doctor matched his study with its old-fashioned, well-worn furniture. He was awkwardly dressed in a capacious jacket and baggy trousers. His grizzled beard was trimmed in a wedge shape and wisps of stray hair trembled on his forehead. He wore gold spectacles with thick lenses which gave his eyes a stubborn, distant look.

"How did this happen?" he asked as he examined Matveyev.

"We were attacked by roughs...."

"Indeed!"

"And ... they hit him. Shot at him."

The doctor removed his spectacles and wiped them with his handkerchief.

"How long ago?"

"An hour ago, an hour and a half. Why is he unconscious, doctor?"

"He's lost a lot of blood."

He examined the leg, pursing his lips and whispering something to himself. He shook his head disapprovingly.

"Roughs. . . . Why did you get mixed up with them, those roughs?"

"They got mixed up with us."

"Of course. It was their fault. But you could have left them without having a row. Had to start a fight, eh?"

A tall lean man with a green face and long teeth came into the room. He nodded at Bezais, cast a brief glance at Matveyev and put on a smock.

"Just have a look at this," said the doctor.

The lean man whose name was Ilya Semyonovich walked over to the sofa, buttoning up his smock as he went.

"A fracture?"

"A bullet wound. It's touched the bone."

They transferred Matveyev to the operating-table and brought the lamp close to his leg, which made the rest of the room dark. Ilya Semyonovich touched the wounded leg and grimaced.

"How did this happen?" he asked. Bezais repeated his story though now it sounded unconvincing. The doctor looked at him with obvious disbelief: it was as though Bezais himself had shot Matveyev in the leg.

"All right, all right," he said impatiently.

Ilya Semyonovich laid out some gleaming instruments on a piece of gauze. It frightened Bezais to see those glittering curves and ruthless sharp edges

fashioned to cut into living flesh. Beyond them stretched a line of glass-topped bottles. With a few movements of the sharp scissors Ilya Semyonovich cut away the blood-stained cloth and bared Matveyev's leg. The doctor looked sternly at Bezais.

"Don't talk and don't cough," he said. "Take your watch and count his pulse—all the time. Do you know how to count a pulse?"

"Yes. But how is he, doctor? Is it serious?"

"Very. Don't talk, I said."

He leaned over the leg and started to remove the blood from the skin with balls of snow-white cotton wool. The blood had already formed a parched brown crust. Bezais went on counting mechanically, making every effort to prevent his fingers trembling. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the blood and the exposed flesh, and felt terrible. Plucking up his courage, he turned his head. He saw a big, jagged-edged wound on the inside of Matveyev's leg. The fractured bone, a dull, pale pink with crimson veins, quite small—no more than a centimetre and a half in length—pierced the skin. Fresh blood was oozing through the crust of dried blood. Matveyev's toes were unnaturally white and still.

Bezais felt a momentary spasm of nausea and weakness which made him hate himself. He shut his eyes. He could not go on looking at this. The sight of the wound reminded him of a butcher's shop where sticky pieces of beef were displayed on counters. But some inner power forced him to open his eyes and, conquering his fears, he watched the doctor raise the edges of the skin with his forceps and put the torn muscles in place.

The lamp cast a bright light on the operating-table, on the surgeon's rapidly moving fingers, the cotton wool and the neat row of instruments. Outside its chalk-white glare the rest of the room lay in half-darkness. Only the gilt bindings of the bookcase gave off a faint gleam. The pan of water gurgled on the stove, a cloud of steam melted under the lamp-shade covering the glass with beads of moisture.

"How many?" the doctor asked suddenly.

Bezais did not at once realize that he was being addressed.

"Three hundred and seventy-one."

"Wh-at? How many?"

"Three hundred and seventy-one."

"You really mustn't be so silly," the doctor said, his cheek twitching. "You must count by the minute. How many beats a minute, understand?"

He leaned over Matveyev again. His hands were stained with blood. His fingers moved with incredible speed. He worked like a machine, a gesture to the right, one to the left, without haste, without being diverted one moment from his objective. Bezais saw his back with its sharp shoulder-blades straight in front of him. The room smelt strongly of alcohol and overheated air. The maid silently picked up the pan, full of blood-stained balls of cotton wool. The blue flame of the spirit-stove hissed steadily in the silent room. Ilya Semyonovich moved his hands monotonously, and everything—the cold operating-table, the ticking of the clock, the doctor's white smock, the pulse throbbing at his finger-tips—aroused a feeling of poignant sadness in Bezais.

"How many?" asked the doctor.

Bezais maintained a stupid silence. The doctor looked at him through his thick shiny glasses with mute hatred. He was engrossed in his work and took every lapse on the part of Bezais as a personal affront. Bezais had the feeling that had the doctor not been busy with the operation he would have stabbed him with the thin glistening knife he held in his hand.

"Keep your eyes on the watch, not on me. What are you staring at?" the doctor said. "Tell me every minute how many beats. Come on."

Bezais kept his eyes on the watch. The second hand ran round the watch face quickly. The maid came into the room again. A strong, sweetish smell crept over the room, a smell that left a taste on the tongue.

"Seventy-two," said Bezais.

He felt ashamed of himself. After all, he was not a woman. He and Matveyev had worked together, had been under fire together. One ought to be prepared to do anything for a comrade—even to chop off his leg if need be—and to do it conscientiously and efficiently.

"Seventy-three," he said.

By the end of the operation Bezais was quite exhausted, barely conscious of what was going on around him. With dragging feet he helped Ilya Semyonovich carry Matveyev to the sofa, he listened with a mechanical smile to the jokes of the doctor whose humour suddenly improved after the bandaging was finished. Ilya Semyonovich washed his hands, put on his jacket and went to drink tea in the dining-room. Matveyev's leg wore a thick white bandage below the knee. Bezais stood trying to remember what

to do next—he had to get Matveyev dressed again. Dropping to his knees he began to button up Matveyev's clothes. The doctor took off his smock and splashed water over his hands at the wash-stand.

"I must say you did it all very neatly," remarked Bezais who felt an impulse to say something pleasant to the doctor.

The doctor wiped his hands on a Turkish towel.

"Yes, I know a little about this kind of job. But he's still quite a boy. How old is he?"

"I I don't know.... Twenty. Twenty-one."

"H'm.... That's strange, not knowing how old your brother is."

"I've forgotten," said Bezais thoughtfully.

He could not cope with the buttons. Matveyev groaned and moved his head. Then Bezais remembered that Varya was waiting outside. He had quite forgotten her as he had everything else. What would she be doing out there in the cold with someone else's horses?

"Doctor!"

Bezais sprang to his feet, his fists clenched, ready to fight the whole town. The doctor was standing near the telephone, receiver in hand.

"Who are you going to ring up?"

"I'm calling the hospital."

"Why?"

"To get them to come for him."

"Please, don't call them. I'll take him home."

"Why?"

"I have to. I don't want him to be in hospital. Hang up."

"And if I don't"

"If you don't. . . . Hang up."

"But he ought to lie in hospital. It's the only thing to do. He needs very careful treatment."

"He'll get it. Don't call, I beg you not to."

The doctor replaced the receiver and put his hands into his pockets.

"I see," he said vaguely, his lips protruding.

Bezais dropped on to his knees again and pulled on Matveyev's stockings and boots in feverish haste.

"Look," he heard the doctor say, "you might be attacked again by those . . . roughs."

"They won't attack us."

He was conscious of the doctor's fixed look on the nape of his neck, and hurried over his work. They had to get away as soon as they could; they were in a very hot spot.

He heard the doctor rustling some papers on the desk and putting his instruments away. Then the doctor began to pace the room, coughing, snapping his fingers and puffing quietly. At last, he walked over to Bezais and stood immediately behind him.

"Now tell me the truth. Where did it happen? Don't lie to me."

And, in a low voice, he said:

"You're a Bolshevik. And he's a Bolshevik too."

Bezais rose slowly to his feet and found himself staring straight into the doctor's gold-rimmed spectacles, at his fleshy nose, his wedge-shaped beard. He lowered his eyes to the doctor's neck, to the soft collar of the homespun shirt. Then, thrusting his left shoulder forward, he planted his feet firmly on the floor.

"Listen," he said, breathing evenly and straighten-

ing his fingers. "Enough of this joke. It could end badly for you."

"Badly?" the doctor echoed quietly.

"Very badly," said Bezais, just as quietly.

Suddenly he saw the crow's-feet at the corners of the doctor's eyes dance merrily. He felt somewhat put out. But the doctor's face resumed its serious expression.

"Would you kill me? Drag me into a corner and suffocate me with a cushion?"

"We shall see," Bezais faltered.

"But joking apart. . . ."

"We shall see, we shall see."

The doctor retreated a few paces, looking at Bezais in astonishment.

"And how old are you?"

"Nineteen," lied Bezais sullenly.

The doctor looked back at him for a moment with an expression in his eyes that Bezais could not fathom. After a little reflection he asked:

"You haven't had any dinner today, have you?"

"No."

"You're mad," said the doctor, shaking his head. "All right, don't pull such a face. I know you're armed to the teeth. Why have you started meddling in politics so early? What d'you get out of that? Why, what you need now is a glass of milk and a good night's sleep. You're wearing yourself out. First you ought to grow up and get strong, and then you can choose between the Whites and the Reds. You look quite ill. Don't you feel a pain here, below your shoulder-blades?"

"No."

"Society, communism, ideals, they're all very well—but you ought to think of yourself a little too. You'll tire yourself out. Take some rest, breathe fresh air and eat better. Of course, you'll tell me that's the Menshevik programme. But I'm quite certain that if your Lenin were here he'd send you off to bed. But you're not listening to me."

Bezais was exhausted. All he knew was that there was no need to be afraid of the doctor.

"I'm listening. If Lenin were here he would put me to bed. You have a professional approach to things. There are many things in the world that you cannot understand."

"Too old?"

"Maybe."

"And stupid."

"No. But you're not one of us."

"One of you! But you're no more than a boy."

Bezais noticed with sudden surprise that the doctor was upset.

"One of you. . . . Why don't you say it straight out—that I'm a blood-sucker. And that I'll probably betray you. Am I right?"

He cut himself short.

"I'm joking. Of course, I'm not one of you. D'you know what? Come along with me and have something to eat. You look quite worn out."

"I can't, thank you. There's a girl waiting for me outside."

"Your sister, I presume. Well, just as you like."

"How much do I owe you for your services?"

"D'you mean to say you have money? Buy yourself some fruit drops with it."

He went over to the desk, wrote out some prescriptions and told Bezais at length what had to be done. He insisted that on the following day Bezais should take him to Matveyev.

"Politics are politics but gangrene is gangrene."

Bezais nodded mechanically. He was overwhelmed by the events of the day and felt quite wretched.

"Very well," he said cheerlessly.

Somehow he managed to finish dressing Matveyev. Then he put his arm round his neck and raised him from the sofa. Matveyev continued to moan indistinctly. It made Bezais think of the way a bullock moans after the last crushing blow in the slaughter-house. He found it hard to carry Matveyev but he would not let the doctor help him.

"I'll manage alone."

He carried Matveyev outside and laid him carefully on the sledge. He covered him with his overcoat. Then he removed his own greatcoat and placed this over Matveyev as well.

"How is he?" Varya asked. "You'll catch cold."

"I'll be all right. Well, let's go."

He looked round. The doctor was at the door, his thin hair and the flaps of his jacket stirred by the wind. His face wore an anxious look and his eyes seemed huge and dark behind his thick spectacles. As if remembering something Bezais got off the sledge and shook hands with the doctor.

"Good-bye. My comrades and I are very grateful."

"That's all right," said the doctor. "You don't have to bother about me. You're right, of course. You have too much on your hands to pay attention to old fogies

like me. You have to boil old men down for soap, don't you?"

He slammed the door but opened it again.

"But be sure to send for me tomorrow."

THE LEG

THE MOMENT Matveyev opened his eyes he felt that life had changed. It was as though the earth and the air were essentially different. At one side of his bed he saw a window, a net curtain and the branch of a pine-tree swaying beyond the pane of glass. Someone was tiptoeing about the room.

"Come in," he heard Bezais say. "But please be very quiet. Tell them to shut the kitchen door. We'll have to boil them for five minutes, I think. He likes them that way."

Someone answered in a whisper. Matveyev dozed off again but suddenly he heard a sound that he hadn't heard for a long time. Somewhere a cat was mewling. He clearly visualized it walking, its back arched, and rubbing against one's foot. He turned his head and the voices ceased. Bezais came and sat on the edge of the bed.

"How are you, old man?" Bezais asked with a broad smile. "Alive and kicking? Lie down, lie down. You must get used to the idea of lying down for a pretty long time."

"I'm hot," said Matveyev. "Take this thing off me."

He felt a pain in his left shoulder and winced.

"Hurts, eh?" said Bezais, shaking a thermometer. "Come on, let me take your temperature." He laid

his hand on Matveyev's brow. "You're hot. Feverish. Keep yourself well covered."

"Where are we?"

"At Varya's place. Surely you remember the hulla-baloo last night when we turned up here."

He remembered nothing—his head felt quite empty. All his thoughts were concentrated on the net curtain, the window and the shaggy bough that swayed monotonously before his eyes. His body ached with a gnawing pain, an entirely novel sensation for him. He had cut his fingers, taken many a tumble, had his head bruised in a scrap, but never before had he known pain like this.

At that moment he recalled something that had happened long ago, something that involved him and a sausage, but which he had forgotten years ago. Sausage was being issued on the ration cards and he had stood since dawn in a queue that stretched along several streets. The queue moved slowly. As day broke a detachment of Special Service Troops marched past singing; in an office opposite a Red Army man typed with one finger. After dinner some workmen came to build a triumphal arch in connection with a holiday. It was already evening when Matveyev reached the shop and then, when the shop-assistant weighed for him half a pound of bright pink sausage, Matveyev discovered that he had brought his kerosene cards by mistake. And now he suddenly felt uncomfortable and ashamed of his carelessness. The sausage ration cards were dark blue with a white border, he recalled, while the ones he had brought were pink, without a border.

But then he forgot about the incident again and realized that Bezais was sitting at his side.

"What's the matter with me, Bezais? Why am I in bed?"

Bezais dropped a spoon and spent a long time looking for it.

"They got you in the leg," he said, twiddling the spoon in his hands. "But don't worry, there's no danger now. We'll take care of you."

A new idea worried Matveyev. It gave him no peace and he racked his brains helplessly to remember what it was. He knew it was something important and that he had to remember what it was without fail.

"How d'you like your eggs?" Bezais asked quietly. "Scrambled or hard-boiled?"

"I like them . . ." Matveyev began. Then he suddenly remembered. "What about the money? And the papers? Are they all right?"

"Don't worry. They're safe."

"Are you telling the truth, Bezais? Have you got them?"

Bezais rose submissively and drew a packet out of a knapsack. But when he returned to the bed Matveyev was already asleep. Bezais went to the door. Varya sat leaning against the door-post.

"Come on. Let him sleep."

They went into the next room. Varya crossed to the window. This was the dining-room. It had a dinner-table, a sideboard badly scratched by little boys, and a sofa upholstered in oilcloth. On the walls hung a barometer, a map and a faded photograph of Varya's mother, taken when she was still a girl and wore a high-collared jacket.

"It's good he's sleeping," said Bezais. "It means his wound isn't worrying him much. But I feel awful when I remember the way the doctor cleaned his leg yesterday. The poor fellow. Has your mother come back?"

"Not yet."

"You wouldn't have been able to stand it. When I was on the Polish front and in hospital, having a tumour removed from under my right arm, I saw some terrible things. The doctors brandished their knives right and left. They got so used to chopping people up that they wanted to take my arm right off. I only just managed to get away from them. They took me to the operating-room, undressed me and laid me on a frightfully cold marble table. I felt awfully cold and shivered so hard that the table creaked. The doctor—it was a woman—touched the tumour and ...one, two, and that was all."

He paused impressively.

"They made such a hole in my arm-pit that you could have stuck your fist in it."

Varya did not reply. She pressed her brow to the window-pane. Bezais waited for her to say something. But she had no desire to make conversation.

Bezais wandered about the room whistling. He felt bored.

"I managed today all right. But what shall I tell him tomorrow? Hell, oh hell! As soon as he can stand I'll get him away from this damned town. We'll leave at the first opportunity. It's the worst place on earth."

Varya swung round.

"You're going away? When?"

"I don't know. As soon as he's fit to be moved."

"Why, Bezais? You'll only get in trouble again. Then you'll be wounded too."

He made a deprecatory gesture.

"We'll die, all the same."

"But that's silly. Why don't you wait till the Reds come back?"

"What if they don't come for a year?"

"You can't go away like that, without even knowing where you're going. Especially now."

"But that's what we did. You have the psychology of a non-Party person. Mummy, Daddy, they'll kill you, and all that. But I've seen many things in life."

The day was sunless and a dull light filled the room. Varya turned back to the window. Bezais roamed the room, feeling desperate and ready for anything.

"We have real young fellows in our country, in Soviet Russia," he said, frowning. "We all risk our skins. Today his leg, tomorrow my head. This is a serious business. Matveyev knows that very well himself, he doesn't have to be persuaded."

He went to the mirror and examined his face. The skin was chapped and red; there were dark rings round his eyes. He was thin at all times but now much thinner than usual. During the journey he had grown out of the habit of sleeping in a bed and eating at a table. But he had never attached any importance to such things. Being healthy, he said, was purely a matter of chance, like being fair or dark. In our times only the *petit bourgeois* had the right to be healthy. We just had no time to take cures and put on weight.

He listened carefully—not a sound came from Matveyev's room. Varya's mother, Alexandra Vasilyevna, had gone for the doctor, for it had been decided that

for the time being Bezais should keep clear of the streets. For lack of anything else to do Bezais leaned towards the mirror and pulled an angry face. He examined his expression for a while, then arched his eyebrows and squinted. Just then he thought he heard Varya sobbing. Turning round he saw he had not been mistaken. Varya's hair was all over her face and she was trembling and wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.

"What's the matter, Varya?"

She did not answer. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket but after a moment's reflection put it back.

"What is it?"

It was an idle question, and Bezais knew it. Women were always a complete surprise to him and he could never guess what trick they might be up to the next minute. When men are in trouble they smoke or cut the table with a penknife. But women cry for every reason: when they are happy or sad, when something unexpected happens or when they are frightened—so what was the sense in asking them the reason? Feeling depressed, he pulled out a cigarette and lit it.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," he said, searching for the right words. "A grown-up, advanced, intelligent girl like you crying like a baby! Ugh! You cried yesterday, you're crying again today. It seems to have become a habit. Your mother will come back and God knows what she'll think. She'll think that I . . . that you . . ."

He broke off with his mouth agape. A new, unexpected thought struck him suddenly. Had that day he had waited for so long and so patiently, had his great day dawned after all? He ought to be singing. shout-

ing, going mad with joy and not chattering these limp commonplace words of comfort. She was crying because he was going away. The ball was rolling towards him, he ought to grasp it with both hands.

"Is it true?" he whispered excitedly to himself. "Bezais, old man."

He stepped across the room and moved towards Varya, dodging every chair. Her figure with its rounded shoulders looked touching and sweet framed in the grey rectangle of the window. Her hair shone about her head in a golden halo. Bezais had but one aim, an intoxicating, glittering aim, beyond which he saw nothing more: to fling his arms round her waist. The world had revealed to him the strangest and most beautiful of the mysteries it preserves for every man—even when he has a freckled face and pink ears.

"Varya."

She hid her face and he saw only her neck and her trembling breast.

"Varya," he repeated with a wailing note that frightened him.

She pushed his hand away.

"Leave me alone. Mind your own business."

"Don't cry."

"Leave me in peace."

He stood still for a moment and then rushed on as though tearing himself from someone's grasp. Fighting down his own reluctance he flung his arms around her. Then he grew calmer and stood for a little time enjoying this new feeling and summoning up his courage to make a further advance. Up to this point he had been able to act in silence, using only his arms, and that had been bearable, but soon he would

have to open his mouth. He was afraid of those inevitable words and yet he was longing to say to her: "I love you."

"Calm yourself . . . I beg you, do," he said, exhausting his meagre vocabulary of tender phrases. "Oh, please do."

"I won't say another word."

"But please stop crying," he said softly, utterly exhausted.

She was all resistance but Bezais grasped her shoulders and turned her round to face him. Then she removed her hands from her face and looked up at him with tearful eyes. How pretty she was, he thought with excitement.

"Do you realize, Bezais," she began anxiously, no longer ashamed of her tears, "he didn't even ask about me. If only he'd said one word. Why, I might have been wounded too, killed even, but that was all the same to him. He asked about you, about the money, about the papers, but me he didn't even remember. Does that mean I simply don't exist for him? Doesn't he think about me one little bit? What d'you think, Bezais?"

Holding her breath she looked questioningly at him. Bezais stood dumbfounded, his eyes wide with surprise. It was impossible to guess what her next trick would be. With men it was all so much simpler, but women always seemed to be playing charades: it looked like one thing but turned out to be something quite different.

Only the most commonplace and hackneyed phrases ran in his head, phrases like: "Oh, that's how it is," or "I suspect you . . ." or "I've noticed something for

a long time." But none of these would do. Tears hung on her eyelashes and her eyes looked bigger and brighter than usual. Bezais removed his hands carefully from her waist.

"What a silly you are," he said with ill-feigned surprise. "He probably doesn't even realize where he is or what's happened to him. If you'd been wounded you'd soon know what it's like. When they cut a tumour out from under my right arm at the front I didn't recognize anyone. That's not surprising. Loss of blood, fever, weakness, why, that's worse than any illness."

"But he remembered the papers and the money, didn't he?"

"Yes, he remembered the papers. That's a Party matter. That's more important than any illness. You'll never understand a thing like that."

She shook her head.

"That's not the reason. I know he considers me stupid and *petite bourgeoise*."

"Why do you think that?" he answered evasively. "He's never said anything like that to me. He's ill now, that's all, and it's silly to expect gallantries from him. And here are you howling and soaking everything with your tears and making a scene in front of me. D'you want me to show you what you look like when you cry?"

He pulled a face and pretended to sob. Varya quickly wiped away her tears and pushed him away.

"All right, go away," she said, blushing and smiling with embarrassment. "Go away. What are you looking at me for?"

Bezais turned and left her. As he passed the table he picked up a bun and sat down to turn over the

pages of a family album. Eating the bun he looked mechanically at the yellowing photographs of bearded men and strangely dressed women.

"No," he said, slamming the album to. "Every man can be a bit of an ass. But he can't be quite such an ass."

He got up, walked about the room and stopped in front of an absurd coloured clay dog which stood on the chest of drawers. The dog had a pink nose and touching blue eyes; one ear was cocked. Bezais tapped it on the nose. It rang hollowly.

"That's your private business," he whispered to himself. "You're in love and you burst into sobs. But why do I, Victor Bezais, have to listen to all that? And if I don't want to? What's it got to do with me, may I ask?"

The dog's clay eyes looked back at him fixedly.

On the following day the doctor called again. He examined Matveyev tossing in fever, spent a long time writing a prescription and questioning Varya. Then he rose and drew Bezais into a corner.

"Is he really your brother?" he asked.

"No. He's my comrade."

The doctor took Bezais by the arm and drew a deep breath.

"Well, it makes no difference. But you must be brave about this. Are you listening?"

"Brave about what?" Bezais asked, a cold feeling running down his spine.

"We'll have to amputate. There's no alternative."

For a flash Bezais lost sight of the doctor. Before him he saw Matveyev—healthy, broad-shouldered, chest muscles bulging under his shirt.

"That's impossible. How can you?"

"The bone is smashed to pieces. It can't be made to grow again. It's begun to fester."

Bezais ran his fingers through his hair in emotion.

"But isn't there anything you can do, doctor? You don't know what a man he is. He's so strong and fit. What will he do with only one leg?"

The doctor's brows twitched angrily.

"You oughtn't to get involved in such things," he said with suppressed anger. "You ought to stay at home and not ask for trouble. Why did you do it? Who asked you to?"

Bezais was not listening. He knew only that they were going to amputate Matveyev's leg below the knee and that nothing on earth could help him.

"You can't possibly understand what you're doing. Boys with ideology, hah!"

"It'd be better to kill him outright," said Bezais in despair. He could not imagine Matveyev with one leg. "What will happen if you don't operate?"

"He'll die, that's all."

"Then it would be better if he died," said Bezais with a strange glitter in his eyes.

The doctor folded his hands behind his back and walked from one corner of the room to the other. Matveyev muttered some nonsense in his delirium.

"Better, you think?" the doctor asked thoughtfully, stopping before Bezais.

"Better."

A long time passed—fifteen minutes, at least.

"Where will he go?" asked Bezais. "What use will he be? D'you want him to prop up a fence, begging?"

He's got so much health and vitality—what will he do?"

There was another long pause.

"I'm going to operate anyway," the doctor said. "How he's going to live is his own business, not yours. Do you hear?"

"Yes."

"Tomorrow, I think."

"Is that final? Is there no other way out?"

"I've told you. If you consult a doctor you must trust him."

"Where are you thinking of doing it?"

"Don't worry, he'll be safe. The operation will be done at the hospital. I vouch for it that no one will know who he is. We've no choice. You can't do things like this at home. It's a complicated business."

Bezais fell silent.

"Don't you trust me?" the doctor asked bitterly.

"D'you think I'll give you away?"

"No. But are you sure yourself that no one will find out?"

"I can vouch for that."

Late that evening Ilya Semyonovich and a woman came for Matveyev. They took him away and brought him back on the following evening. Matveyev's left leg was blunt and shortened. Bezais went into the dark dining-room and sat on the sagging sofa. He felt like groaning.

He felt guilty—guilty for being fit, for possessing two sound legs and muscles that played lightly under the skin. They had set out together and come under fire together, but Matveyev alone had paid for every-

thing. That was not Bezais's fault, it was his luck that not one of the bullets had touched him, but sometimes how intolerable, how hellishly hard it is to be lucky!

THE CLAY DOG

MATVEYEV regained consciousness suddenly, as though he had been jolted. He shuddered and opened his eyes. The room, strange and unfamiliar, enveloped in a grey half-light, floated slowly before his eyes.

He felt a heavy presentiment of something terrible. Everything around him had a wild, disproportionate look. The ceiling and walls lurched at sharp angles. On a table near the bed stood bottles and a glass with a tea-spoon in it. They looked unnaturally big, filling up the whole place. A chest of drawers standing against the opposite wall seemed to be far, far away as if seen through the wrong end of a pair of binoculars. The dusk stirred in the corners of the room. Matveyev listened to its faint rustling. Was it early morning or evening?

Closing his eyes he felt the bed begin to rock beneath him slowly, with a floating movement. First the end of the bed rose, then down it came and the head rose. He opened his eyes, turned over and suddenly let out a wild cry. Someone was outside the window, pressing his broad face to the glass, and looking at him without moving.

He pressed himself down to the bed in horror. All his senses suddenly became sharp and tense. He saw in every tiny detail how the dark figure at the window raised its hand, pressed on the window-frame and

sent the glass splintering on to the blanket. A dark silhouette forced its way into the room and leaned on the window-sill, crunching splinters of glass under its elbows. Matveyev saw a big head, a pair of broad shoulders, hair curling at the ears, but he could not distinguish the face—there was a sort of grey blot instead of a face.

The wind blew into the room, playing with the curtains. A few snow-flakes whirled over Matveyev.

In his fleeting remnants of consciousness Matveyev realized that he was delirious.

“There’s nothing there,” he whispered.

In fact, at that moment the silhouette turned pale and he found he could see the outlines of the window-frame through it. He strained every effort to free himself from the heavy hands of the nightmare. It was as if he were trying to break loose from a tangle of ropes. But then he felt himself plunging into a wild ghostly world and the delirium closed over his head like heavy water. The outline of the dark figure grew even clearer in the blue rectangle of the window.

He lost track of day and night, the frontiers of time vanished. When he opened his eyes again it was late at night and the moon was shining into the room. There was no one at the window now. The net curtain hung in its familiar neat folds and the pane of glass gleamed dully. Matveyev lay for a long time without a thought in his head. Then he heard a faint cheep and turned his head. The cheeping ceased. A moment or two later a big red rat advanced quietly out of the darkness and stopped in a pool of moonlight. It was as big as a cat, with short silvery hair on its thin round ears. It stood still, ears raised, and then moved

on, dragging its long tail along the floor and holding its narrow muzzle low. Matveyev watched it move gradually out of the moonlight—first its head, then its body and finally all, to the tip of its tail, slid into the darkness.

After the rat came two velvety reptiles, unnaturally big, which began to glide about the room. They romped like horses, rustling the papers and advancing impudently close to the bed. Their bare paws seemed to be transparent. Matveyev shouted at them several times and they retreated slowly into a corner, only to return to the middle of the floor. Then they stopped paying any attention to him, ignoring his presence completely, and moved about, scratching and squeaking, till they drove him to the verge of tears. How he would have loved to kill them!

Again he slumped into an abyss, somewhere between sleep and a swoon. The moon went behind clouds and shed an even milky light into the room. The door creaked and in came Zhukanov. He brought a gust of cold air in with him. Matveyev looked at him with loathing and half shut his eyes. Through lowered lids he saw Zhukanov brushing snow away from his left side. It was on his left side that he had fallen, Matveyev recalled.

Zhukanov pushed a chair up to the bed and sat down. Taking off his hat, he smoothed his scanty hair and began to say something, smiling and casting questioning looks at Matveyev. Matveyev felt too tired to listen, let alone reply. His head lay heavily on the hot pillow. The blood thumped hard at his temples. He turned over—there was no one at the window.

His leg did not ache—he did not feel it. Sometimes,

as he brushed the pillow, he felt a quick twinge of pain from his jaw to his shoulder. Had he been wounded in the shoulder too? Hardly, for Bezais would have told him. It was Zhukanov who had been hit in the shoulder. In the shoulder and the chest, below the throat.

At that moment he clearly saw the clay dog on the chest of drawers raise its hind leg and scratch itself behind the ear with a familiar canine gesture, and then freeze in its unnatural stony pose. It was most surprising.

"Well, well. Fancy that," he whispered.

Zhukanov went on touching his arm. Matveyev looked up and noticed that Zhukanov was angry. What was it this time? The horses again? Oh God, how fed up he was with the man!

"I know nothing about it, ask Bezais. Don't touch me, your fingers are cold. What? I don't care. Can't you see I'm ill?"

The clouds dispersed and the moonlight spread softly into the room. The shadow of the window-frame lay on the blanket. In the next room a clock struck discreetly. Matveyev drew the blanket over his head but stuck his head out again.

"You're a terrible chatterer," he told Zhukanov with an angry look. "Leave me in peace. I don't know a thing, d'you understand? Why are you bothering me? Go away."

Zhukanov bent and smiled guiltily. This enraged Matveyev.

"Go to hell, you old parrot," he shouted, sitting up in bed. "Get out, or I'll get up and bash your head in."

He groped for the bottle and clutched hold of it. Zhukanov stood up.

"I'm wounded too," he said in a hollow voice. "In the shoulder and in the chest, below the throat. I'm also wounded, remember that...."

Matveyev felt a sharp pain. His body grew weak, collapsed like a sheet of paper, and he fell back on to the bed. The bottle rolled along the floor. He choked. Varya was leaning over him, drawing the blanket over his shoulders. He pushed her away.

"I'll square accounts with you one day, you old ass," he said, sticking out his head and grimacing from the unbearable pain in his shoulder.

He had a tremendous urge to swear hard but Varya's presence bothered him. Holding her nightgown with her hand at her breast she covered him with the blanket and said something. Matveyev obediently turned on his other side.

"Idiot," he muttered sleepily and shut his eyes.

The pain slowly diminished. A feeling of weakness spread gently through his body to his very finger-tips. Varya laid her hand on his burning head.

"How high is it?" someone asked.

"It was nearly one hundred and one this evening."

"Oughtn't we to give him some quinine?"

Matveyev did not want to take the quinine. They struck a match and shadows wavered on the wall. Someone was walking about the room, his bare feet stepping carefully.

"I don't want any quinine," said Matveyev.

There was no reply.

"Bring a towel and some vinegar, Mummy," said Varya.

What were they for, Matveyev wondered with displeasure.

He wanted to say that he did not need either a towel or vinegar but at once forgot all about it. He fell asleep immediately and heard nothing more.

How much time passed—a year or a week—he did not know. He still lived in a ghostly, terrible world; before him passed days he had lived through long ago. Old comrades came and sat on his bed and spoke to him of the days of war, and he again experienced the joys and horrors of those ardent years. In the twilight of his room he heard the word of command—it rang out like a challenge and made him quiver with excitement. He wanted to take his place in the ranks, to fling himself forward with the rest and utter that desperate cry—“*Dayosh!*”

It was Christmas time—a happy, frosty Christmas with roast goose, cotton wool angels and an old fir-tree. The kitchen fire blazed, and Alexandra Vasilyevna walked around spreading an aroma of vanilla and cream. That day belonged to her—no one cared to argue with her or sneak into the kitchen for a smoke. When the ham was in the oven the whole house was in a turmoil. One moment she would call for help, then turn everyone out of the kitchen and burst into tears. The ham came out a beautiful dark red; it was placed on the dining-room table and decorated with an appealing paper ruffle.

The Christmas-tree had to be stood in the bedroom because the dining-room was next to Matveyev's room. Several days were spent in fussing with motley-coloured paper garlands and flags. Bezais said all that was prejudice and nonsense and that to an enlightened man the Christmas-tree was one of those

stupid vestiges of the past like the stone hammer. Varya was a little uncertain at first but later on said she had always thought like Bezais. And when the candles were lit in the evening only the parents and the small fry were there around the Christmas-tree: they walked around its sparkling beauty and sang in quiet voices, so as not to awaken Matveyev: "Uncle Trifon had seven children. . . ."

The family treated Matveyev as someone special. To that quiet house, he brought the legendary dark-toned glory of a proud and desperate man who spared neither himself nor others. They had never seen bold killers, treasure-hunters, famous poets and other unusual people who made their fantastic way through life. Varya's father, Dmitry Petrovich, had for thirty-two years sailed along the river from Nikolayevsk to Sretensk and back without meeting adventures of any kind. It was never his lot to moor at an unknown shore where iridescent birds chirruped tirelessly, strange flowers bloomed and black-skinned people exchanged gold for bits of coloured glass. The faded photographs of him in the dining-room had been taken when for the first time he wore his mechanic's stripes—looking rather thin, with side whiskers and a stern look in his blue eyes. At first he had sailed on the *Father Sergius*—a green-painted ship with the wheel in the stern—which brought salted salmon, cheap calico, Japanese fans, matches and needles upstream. Downstream, from Sretensk, she sailed in ballast, picking up an occasional passenger—shaggy-bearded, weather-beaten men from Transbaikalia travelling to the estuary in search of work. The *Father Sergius* belonged to the Nikolayev and Somov Coasting

Company, Khabarov'sk, and was the only ship on the company's books. Dmitry Petrovich took over the ship within a week of the death of the old captain.

The *Father Sergius* was a remarkably ramshackle ship, as old as the river itself, as the grey Amur reeds. Its owners were themselves surprised to see her return from Khabarovsk and overstrain herself hooting at the landing-stage. She kept afloat by some miracle, against all reason. Her old green hull, patched in dozens of places, her rusty funnel and dirty cracked deck were an invitation to thoughts on immortality. She was a surprising legend as she sailed, furrowing the blue waves of the huge river with senile efforts.

For eight years Dmitry Petrovich took the *Father Sergius* along the river, selling salmon, small shot and cloth to the riverside villagers. The Coasting Company's affairs did not go too well. One day the owners offered Dmitry Petrovich a partnership but he turned the offer down—it would have been foolhardy to invest money in that mass of rusty iron and old timbers. At the age of thirty-one he transferred to the *Daur*, became second engineer and married.

His cherished dream was to get on to a big passenger ship. That was the theme of endless family conversation. "When Father gets his passenger ship"—that was how all plans for a calm, secure future began. Little Varya saw the passenger ship as a kind, generous god. The passenger ship became a part of their daily life, connected with every minute of it. They had waited for her so long that it seemed incredible that Father hadn't been appointed to it. With the passage of years Dmitry Petrovich grew still thinner and his hair and brows turned white. Past

forty and already a senior engineer, he seemed quite near to fulfilling his dream.

Varya remembered every detail of the clear spring day when the office sent the message. Her mother was cleaning the dining-room windows, a cock was crowing aimlessly in the yard. The messenger arrived, waving aside the children who were playing at the door, and handed her mother a big envelope. Father was asked to call at the office.

The messenger's bearing and manner of speaking, the sealed envelope, the polite and laconic terms in which the letter was couched, were quite unusual and novel. Father silently put on his coat, kissed his wife and went out, pale and proud. Even the two little boys quietened down, sensing that the momentous hour has struck. Varya's mother lit the icon lamp and sent Varya running after her father with his handkerchief which he had left behind.

Father returned home late, very tired, and went into the dining-room without removing his cap from his grey head. He had been appointed inspector of the repair yards—a quiet haven suitable for old men. He had to forget about the passenger ship but it was difficult to forget things which had been cherished for dozens of years. That day no one had supper, no one laughed or even spoke. It was as though some close relative had died.

A corner room, used for tea-parties, was set apart for Matveyev. He lay there half dozing and, oblivious of what was going on around him, looked straight ahead. His recovery was slow, he regained consciousness in short stages—sometimes he would see

Bezais, Varya or some strange people quite clearly and talk to them. He knew that his leg had been amputated but he was incapable either of surprise or fear—again he would fall into delirium and the room become full of the sound of voices, rustling leaves and the clatter of hooves on strange, untravelled roads. Sometimes he felt pain but he had grown accustomed to illness and gulped down the medicine without a word.

Was it delirium or did it really happen—he never knew—but one day he noticed Bezais sitting near him on the bed. Bezais looked him straight in the eye and, after a long pause, said:

“They’ve amputated your leg, old man. D’you know?”

Matveyev thought, shut his eyes, then opened them again. Straight in front of him hung a framed testimonial awarded to pupil Dmitry Volkov for excellent studies and exemplary behaviour. Not far from where it hung was nailed a drawing of an enormous butterfly with thick whiskers and paw-like feet, clinging to a small, miserable-looking flower. The butterfly looked more like a spider, and Matveyev had found it hard to get used to it. What made him specially angry were the butterfly’s vacant eyes and unnaturally big feet.

“I know,” he said. “D’you think you could take that picture down?”

Bezais got up and removed the picture. He sat down on the bed again.

“Yes, I know,” said Matveyev, recalling something. “Are those crutches over there for me?”

But then he suddenly became aware that Bezais was no longer there but that in his place sat the commander of the 23rd Brigade, Comrade Bragin,

with whom he had crossed the Don Military Region, the Ukraine and the Caucasus. They had bathed in the sea together at Batum and eaten golden oranges. Bragin had the same bushy beard and hard-worn tunic. The blue-eyed clay dog sprang down from the chest of drawers, and, knocking on the floor with its inanimate paws, ran up and sniffed Bragin's brown boots.

But sometimes at night he would suddenly wake up with a clear head and lie listening to the faint rustling of the night, thinking until he fell off to sleep again. Many things in life were over for him now—horse-riding, and football too—he'd never be able to run again and leave the rest behind. All that had been wiped out by a chance shot on the highway near a strange town. He felt sorry for his strong, well-built body, and with belated sadness remembered the bright July day when they knocked the spots off the Sedelsk team.

But all these emotions were mixed with a touch of that vanity to which every man who has done more than others always has the right. His was an honourable soldier's wound. After all, not everyone could say that of himself.

Little by little one thought possessed him—to get out of bed. Sometimes he even dreamed of putting on his right boot, taking his crutches and moving about the room with incredible speed. The sense of reality was so strong that on awakening he felt a slight pressure in his arm-pits as if from the crutches. But he knew that for the time being he should not get up and so he waited patiently for his time to come. There, in bed, he noticed all kinds of triviali-

ties. He counted the rods in the back of the bed, the floor-boards; he watched new frost patterns grow on the window-panes. At first he noticed things—things kept their place, they didn't move, they were easier to remember. Only later did he begin to pay attention to people.

It was early morning, on Friday. He felt ravenous. Outside, snow was falling in thick flakes. His head did not ache but his whole body felt weak and lazy. He looked round the room and noticed that near the door stood a small, short-haired boy in trousers and braces, staring at him with curiosity. Noticing that Matveyev had woken up, the little boy grew sheepish and started scratching at a stain on the door.

Matveyev's leg itched so hard that he longed to tear off the bandage. He resisted the temptation with difficulty.

The door opened a few inches and another little, close-cropped head peeped in only to disappear at once.

"Young man," said Matveyev, surprised at the feebleness of his own voice. "Bring me something to eat. A meat rissole or a bun or something."

The little boy grew still more embarrassed. He evidently had not expected to attract so much attention and found it oppressive.

"There are no rissoles today," a timid voice said from the other side of the door. "Mummy's locked the buns in the cupboard."

"What is there?"

"There's some pie with rice and eggs."

"Let's have some."

Both the boys ran off. A few minutes later they re-

turned, red in the face and panting hard as they vied with each other for the honour of feeding Matveyev with big slices of pie. They felt shy in his presence but his crutches made him irresistible and they could not tear their eyes from the sight. They were almost the same height, dressed alike and resembled one another so closely that Matveyev would have muddled them up had not one of them been distinguished by a long red scratch across his chin and a check patch on his trousers. They had their sister Varya's round face and big grey eyes. They evinced a touching interest in every one of Matveyev's movements, and he felt self-conscious about the expression on his face and for every gesture he made. Bezais came in. He took each boy by the ear and drew them out of the room. They followed him meekly.

"I have an account to settle with them," said Bezais, taking off his coat. "Yesterday I caught them lying on the floor pricking out the eyes of the family photographs. What are you eating?"

"Pie with rice and eggs."

"Those boys deserve a spanking. Their father says they've turned his hair grey and I'm beginning to believe it. Don't be taken in by that shy look of theirs—they rage through the house like the plague. Today they managed to break the kitchen window. I've covered it with a newspaper. I suggest you have some semolina porridge and some weak tea with milk and rusks. Pie is forbidden. It's worse than poison for you in your present state—as bad as ground glass. Put it down, right away, d'you hear?"

But Matveyev knew Bezais's habit of exaggerating and calmly finished his pie.

‘Well, I wash my hands of it. D’you know how you’ve been behaving? You’ve been howling and scratching everyone who came near you. D’you remember upsetting a full glass of scalding tea over my trousers? I was furious; I can’t look calmly at tea any more. I didn’t say a word about it at the time but I must say, it was a foul thing to do.’

Matveyev licked his lips.

“All right, give me some semolina porridge. I’ve got an enormous appetite. Tell me, who is Alexandra Vasilyevna?”

“She is Varya’s mother. Very fat and very good-natured. Incidentally, she’s awfully fond of you. She says you’re very much like her cousin who is clever and remarkably handsome. But don’t start thinking too much of yourself—it’s only your eyes and your chin that look like his.”

“Has she got a mole on her cheek?”

“Why, have you seen her? And who d’you think I’m like?”

“I’m hungry, Bezais.”

Bezais left the room and was absent for a long time. Matveyev could hear footsteps and scraps of conversation through the door. He was beginning to feel impatient when Varya came in carrying a trayload of steaming plates and glasses.

“Good morning,” she said, placing the tray on a bedside table. “Was it Kotka who brought you the pie?”

“There were two of them.”

“You’re rambling. Pie is too heavy for you at present.”

“And what have you brought me?”

"Semolina porridge."

Varya sat down near the bed, drew the table forward and sprinkled sugar over a steaming plate of semolina porridge. While travelling she had hardly ever removed her overcoat and shawl and now Matveyev was seeing her for the first time in a frock. She was wearing a grey check frock with a white apron. Her hair was smoothly combed, and at the side, near her left ear, a very fetching little bow was tied. She looked very pretty and seemed to know it.

Matveyev felt very feeble. Occasionally he would fall off to sleep. As he talked he would forget the beginning of the sentence and pause for a long time as he tried to pick up the thread. One thing surprised him very much. Before he had been wounded a nail in his left boot had pierced the sole and had scratched his big toe. Now, as he lay in bed, he felt the toe of his amputated leg aching. He did not understand how that could be, but the sensation was quite clear.

Varya's parents visited him the next day. Matveyev had seen them before but had not talked to them, being busy with his own private thoughts. Varya's mother was a stout, rather short woman with a generous crop of moles on her round ageing face. She had reached the age when the first wrinkles appear, when the hair loses its lustre and dresses fit badly at the back. She came in, wiping her hands on her apron, greeted Matveyev and sat down near his bed. Matveyev thought that had he met her in the street he would have recognized her as Varya's mother at once, they were so alike.

A few minutes later, Varya's father came in. He shook Matveyev's hand, introduced himself briefly:

"Dmitry Petrovich Volkov," and sat on a chair, stiff and embarrassed.

They sat there a long time. At first they did not know what to talk about. Then they asked after Matveyev's health and from then on the conversation ran on in a smooth groove. Varya's parents livened up. The subject of health and illness was a familiar, well-tested one, which never misfired. They recalled dozens of stories of wounds, chills and dislocations. The aim of all this was to convince Matveyev that although his wound was serious it might have been much worse, and that he ought to be thankful that the bullet hadn't struck him in the back or, God forbid, in the head. All agreed that had that happened Matveyev would have been killed. Alexandra Vasilyevna talked about illness with the experience of a mother of three children. Dmitry Petrovich also knew a good deal about such matters. To begin with, Matveyev was bored, but later he grew interested in the subject himself. He was bursting to tell them the story of the little boy who stuck a paper pellet into his ear. He bided his time and slipped in his contribution to the conversation.

"STAY HERE"

"YOU might have given me something with meat in it. I can't stand semolina porridge. It makes me feel a beast."

Matveyev lay propped up on his elbow, stirring the porridge with a spoon. He was being difficult.

"But it's forbidden," said Varya. "You're old enough to know better."

"Of course I am. So why do you feed me on semolina porridge? Just a little slice of meat, eh? How could that do me any harm?"

"No, it's forbidden. Even if I agreed Bezais wouldn't let me give it to you."

She helped him to sit up and slipped a pillow behind his back. Matveyev didn't like her making all this fuss over him; he didn't want to appear helpless.

"Don't fuss," he said with irritation. "I suppose you think I'm dying."

"Of course I don't," she replied, taken aback.

Matveyev took the plate from her and began to eat slowly.

"What's the news? Where is the front line now?"

"I don't know anything at all."

"But that's impossible."

"Honestly, I don't."

"I know what's happening," said Matveyev, taking a piece of bread. "This is all one of Bezais's tricks. I suppose he's forbidden you to talk about that? Oh, I know him. If he has an idea he'd rather let himself be killed than drop his silly tricks. He's probably swaggering round the house and telling you all how they removed his tumour at the front and shouting at everyone."

"That's true," said Varya with a laugh.

"Is he up to anything?" said Matveyev a little later.

"I don't know. He hasn't told me anything."

"Does he go anywhere?"

"He's out all day. But what ought he to be doing?"

"He ought to be thinking how we're going to get away. We're not going to stay here a whole year."

"But won't you stay till the Reds come?"

"Of course not. Who knows when they'll come."

"But your leg?"

"My leg will mend."

The door opened silently, just enough to let in a shy foot in a down-at-heel boot. After the boot came a round head with a scratched chin. Kotya, the younger of the two boys, cast his eyes round timidly till they came to rest on Matveyev. He scrutinized the bed, the bedside table, the plates and glasses. For a few minutes he studied Varya and then turned to Matveyev's bandage. His wide-open eyes expressed reverence and curiosity. Matveyev pulled an angry face but the little boy did not go away.

"But you can't take risks like that," said Varya, playing with the frill of her apron. "Where will you go? You won't know the road and you've got the wrong kind of papers. They'll catch you immediately. You've no right to go to certain death."

"As if I was certain to be killed!"

"You don't trust me, not the least little bit," she said with a new tone in her voice.

"Nothing of the sort."

"I don't understand why do you have to take such a risk? Surely it would be far better simply to wait until the Reds come back. A lot of use you'll be if you get killed."

"I've thought all that over," said Matveyev, putting down the empty plate and wiping his mouth. "Please, don't worry. I know what I'm doing."

"As you like. It's not my business, I suppose?"

"I didn't say that."

She turned her face away and noticed the little boy standing at the door.

"You? What are you up to?"

The little boy turned his eyes on Varya, thought a bit and shuffled his feet.

"All right, come here. Don't be afraid. Say, 'good morning.' Go on, you silly, he won't bite you. How did you get that scratch?"

She rose impulsively, went over to the little boy and dropped on to one knee.

"Poor mite, did Daddy punish you for a pie? Isn't he a little pet, Matveyev? Oh, dear! I see you haven't even washed today. Look, what dirty paws—naughty! But you mustn't ever again bring him pie—he won't listen to what your sister tells him. D'you understand?"

She laughed nervously.

"Why don't you say something? He'll think you're deaf and dumb. Where's Mummy?"

The little boy looked away, lowered his head and remained silent and shy. Varya frowned.

"Now then, don't be obstinate," she said sharply. "Have you swallowed your tongue, you little surly? Where's Mummy? In the kitchen?"

The little boy looked up and smiled, not grasping what she wanted of him. Varya coloured and, grasping him by the shoulders, pushed him towards the door. Turning round, she noticed Matveyev's bored look and her excitement ebbed at once. Rather confused she went over to the bed and sat down.

"Do you still think I'm silly?" she asked, raising her eyes and looking at him uncertainly. "But be frank, please. Don't pretend."

"Why d'you think so? Of course I don't."

Matveyev felt distressed.

"You don't think I'm a *petite bourgeoisie* and that I have no ideals in life, do you?"

He sighed.

"I don't understand the reason for all these questions. Of course, I don't."

Varya got up.

"And if I were to ask one thing of you?" she said. "It's not all that special, honestly, it isn't."

"What is it?"

"To stay here till the Reds come. Bezais can go alone."

"What a funny person you are!" said Matveyev with a wry smile. "Why, I *have* to go. As it is, we've lost a lot of time."

"I don't know. But if I ask you to do it, d'you understand? Please, please stay."

"All right then," Matveyev said, lowering his eyes. "I'll try and do something about it."

They fell silent, avoiding each other's eyes. Varya picked up the plates and left the room. At the door she bumped into Bezais.

Bezais was in high spirits. He looked like a man who had had a good breakfast and feels satisfied with himself and with the world.

"Listen, old man," he said excitedly. "As soon as you learn to digest solid food I'll give you a chance of trying the local steak and onion. She grills them excellently. I had almost forgotten the taste of hot meat and now it's like eating it for the first time. Lucky we ran into Varya. I forgive Maiba for throw-

ing us off the train. What would I have done with you if we hadn't found this quiet family?"

Matveyev lay back and covered himself with the blanket.

"It's a pity you like it so much here. We must leave as soon as we can. Are you making some arrangements?"

"Where are we going?"

"Farther on, to the Maritime Region. Is that news to you?"

"What about your leg?"

"I'm fed up with it. Why, d'you think I'm dying, or what? I'll soon be able to walk all right. But please keep mum about this. Don't say anything to Varya about our leaving. She's a nice girl, of course, but it'd be better to keep quiet about this. If she asks when we're leaving, tell her we're waiting for the Reds."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, that's all."

"Well, now listen to me," said Bezais solemnly. "For exactly a week you'll keep to this room. At first you'll stay in bed and eat semolina porridge. In three days' time you can enjoy eating rusks. And if your temperature remains normal we'll arrange for you an orgy of chicken *consommé*, rice pudding and weak tea. Don't get depressed—if you're very lucky I'll let you walk a little in the yard."

"Don't be so pompous, Bezais. I'll get up and knock the stuffing out of you."

"I'm surprised by the odd impudence of the scoundrel," said Bezais, pointing to Matveyev and pretending to be addressing a public. "You get up? Do you know how much blood you lost? You'll feel dizzy at

the first step. You've got to stay in bed and go on staying there. I've had some experience in these matters, I've had to go through them myself."

"Please don't tell me the story of your tumour again," said Matveyev, laughing and frowning at the same time. "I'm strong enough to throw a boot at you. . . ."

"I'd like to see you try," retorted Bezais.

THE CAFÉ

A FEW days later, Bezais came into Matveyev's room in the evening and saw something that brought him to a halt at the threshold. Matveyev, fully dressed, stood in the middle of the room and, with an uncertain smile, moved slowly towards the window. This was the first time that Bezais had seen him on crutches, and it shocked him.

Matveyev raised his head.

"Keep quiet," he said. "And don't come near. I know, I know. I'm fed up with you."

"Who helped you to dress?"

"I did it by myself. From beginning to end. That takes some doing. One of my boots was under the bed, in a far corner. I fished it out with a crutch. The trousers were the hardest."

He took another step and stopped; he eyed his crutches attentively.

"They make a frightful noise, like a goods train. Never mind, I'm used to it already. Look."

He made the trip to the window and back.

"See? Well, what do you say to that? Let's talk seriously, Bezais. We can't go on this way."

"What?"

"We must do something. I'm bored to death with this place. By the end of the week I shall be able to walk quite freely. But you're not doing a thing, you're not lifting a finger. This can't go on, Bezais."

"Well, what do you want me to do?"

"Go on, that's what I want to do. My hands are itching. You said something once about romanticism. Well, now it's beginning. Find out whether it's possible to go on by rail or not. If it isn't we'll go by sledge. Over there they probably think we've been killed or have taken fright. I'm proposing this categorically and the less you talk the better."

"You must realize it's impossible."

"Stop that. We must push on to our destination and start work."

"You idiot, don't you realize that the place is God only knows where—somewhere in the taiga. It's hard enough for sound people to get through to it, so how are you going to manage?"

Matveyev hobbled to his bed and sat on it.

"This is an unpleasant conversation, Bezais, but it's unavoidable. I have to point out some ugly things against you. You don't want to leave this place. Because of Varya, isn't it? How is your affair getting along? You seem to have been lucky."

Bezais hung his head.

"Lucky, yes," he said with a smile. "Frightfully lucky."

"How far have you got?"

"So far," replied Bezais in measured tones, "that it's impossible to go any further."

"I've noticed that. She's dressing smartly now so as to attract attention. I noticed she'd powdered her nose when she came into the room the other day. I asked her for whose benefit it was and she was terribly embarrassed. I'm glad for your sake but you mustn't neglect Party work for a plump, empty-headed bit of fluff. Why do you never come to see me in the evenings? Busy hugging and squeezing her, I suppose."

"Perhaps," said Bezais, with a twinge of remorse for this forced lie.

Matveyev got up again and moved about the room. This new sensation interested him.

"It's a funny feeling," he said. "Like being on stilts. Where are you off to?"

"I have to leave you for an hour or two now."

"Think over what I said. There's the right time and the right place for everything. But this is no time for chasing after skirts."

"I'll think it over," said Bezais as he opened the door.

He went into the street. A light moonlit haze hung in the air. Bands of crimson, blue and green fell on the street from the big coloured spheres in a chemist's shop. Around the street-lamps the air swirled in lustreless waves. Bezais was always impressionable, and now these streets, bathed in milky moonlight, aroused a strange feeling in him. He felt he was standing outside his own body and watching himself walking to an unknown destination.

"It's a dog's life," he whispered.

Matveyev had drained all the strength out of him. During that week Bezais had felt he was living

through great days. Some things are easier to do than to talk about. He cursed himself for not having had the courage to tell Matveyev the truth.

He stopped outside the door of a basement. This was the Café Venice; a sign over the entrance depicted the sea, the sun, mountains and trees. Strains of music came from the basement. A few passers-by, interested to discover what was going on down below, were leaning over the window and peering in. Bezais went down the worn steps, opened the misted door and entered the café.

Normally he would have found the Café Venice a hateful place, but now he took a keen pleasure in every detail of the tavern. It depends on how you look at things. For Bezais the Venice was the first secret meeting-place in his life. He associated with it his whole conception of real clandestine work, and this ennobled the Venice—even the beer (he hated beer and had never touched it before), even the beer did not taste so bad.

He walked over to a corner of the room and sat down at the last table. He ordered two beers. There were not many people in the café. Up against one of the painted walls stood a harmonium played by a long-haired musician wearing a blouse. He played conscientiously, exerting all his strength. It made Bezais feel quite tired even to watch him. The man thumped the keyboard till the veins stood out on his neck. Hairy palms stood in pots in the corners of the room. At a table in the middle of the room six men sat in a bunch drinking beer. They were drunk but above all they wanted to show they were drunk, shouting, banging their glasses on the table and

smoking hard. At another table sat a pallid prostitute in a short-sleeved dress and high felt boots. The company of drunks dashingly exchanged glances with her but no one dared to invite her to their table.

The man sitting at a table near the bar was really drunk. He was all out—someone could have killed him without his noticing it. But when the prostitute rose and, dragging her feet, passed near him he raised his head and shouted deafeningly:

“Hullo, pet.”

“You fool!” she said without turning her head.

A little bell tinkled over the door. A middle-aged man wearing a shaggy hat came in, glanced round the room and, catching sight of Bezais, came over and sat at his table.

“Beer,” he said to the waiter.

His face was lean and he had a slight squint. This was Comrade Chuzhoi. Bezais liked him, liked him so much that at one time he mechanically began to squint himself. He thought Chuzhoi wonderful, clever and fanatical, the way *Narodovoltsi* should be. It was the doctor who had put him in touch with Chuzhoi. The doctor kept out of things himself but he knew people, he was trusted and sometimes concealed illegal literature at his place.

“I’ll give you the address of one of your sort,” he said to Bezais with a bilious smile. “Just like you—always talking about the proletariat and the Party and doesn’t know a thing about anything else. You Bolsheviks have no sense of humour, you’re all alike.”

The musician was thumping the harmonium deafeningly, bringing showers of dust down from the palms. Without looking at Bezais, Chuzhoi asked:

"Well, how are things?"

"We've used them all up. We need some more."

"Who pasted them up in Grechikha?"

"Simonenko."

"Not enough. Send two or three there. You can leave out the Embankment. No one sees them there, anyway. Osip's been arrested."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Are you being followed?"

"I haven't seen anyone."

"You must be careful. Is your house safe?"

"That's something I want to talk to you about, Chuzhoi." Bezais lowered his voice still more. "I simply can't stand it any longer. You know, that fellow who arrived with me, he's already walking. Till now I've given him the dodge, he doesn't know what I'm up to. But eventually he'll find out and then there'll be no keeping him indoors. It's boring for him to sit there twiddling his thumbs. I wanted to ask you—speak to Nikola—perhaps you could hold a meeting of the group at my place. I can vouch for the owner of the house and his family. They won't blab."

"Why should we do that?"

"To cheer him up a bit, you see. He's feeling very low now. He's always been used to working; he finds it very hard doing nothing. Now he's insisting that we go on further together. He doesn't understand he can't possibly do that. Let him take part in a meeting and get interested in the local work. I think he'd be more calm then sitting indoors and convalescing. The place is quite near and absolutely safe. Speak to Nikola about it."

"It won't be easy to talk Nikola into it."

"Why not?"

"Oh, for no reason in particular. He'll say no, and that's that."

"At least talk to him about it."

"I will."

The drunk moved his legs helplessly and bent still lower over his mug of beer. The big party in the middle of the room noisily settled the bill. Chuzhoi drew Bezais's attention to them with a look.

"Go out with them, you won't be too conspicuous. I'll leave later. If you see you're not being followed, wait for me near the watch-shop."

Bezais nodded. Now he had begun to live the most extraordinary, the very best days of his life. In the evenings he worked with Chuzhoi, forging passports, sticking up manifestoes, carrying weapons and all kinds of things. He was in constant danger of being caught—caught and killed. All this brought a new zest to his life.

He rose to his feet, mingled with the others and walked to the door. He was jolted, his feet were trodden on. When he reached the street he looked about him—there was no one there. Then he set off in the direction of the watch-shop, stopped under a big tin watch that creaked in the wind and waited for Chuzhoi.

A SMALL REQUEST

SINCE the time he had been transferred to a post on land Sundays were sheer punishment for Dmitry Volkov. He did not know what to do with his spare time. He had no responsibilities in the house. His wife and

Varya did all the housework and he did not even know where things were kept. This arrangement dated from the days when he sailed the river and was not seen at home for weeks at a time. He had grown accustomed to the cold, clammy watches above a river misty with the haze of early morning, to the splash of the water seething under the paddles, to the rattle of anchor chains. With his transfer his life had become empty. His voice, accustomed to shouting orders, sounded strange and unfamiliar in the little pink wallpapered sitting-room. He lounged about the room not knowing what to do with himself. His duties consisted of driving a nail into the wall to hang coats and of setting the trap in the pantry, because his wife was afraid of rats.

Sometimes he made up his mind to teach the little boys arithmetic, but they felt like sinners on the Day of Judgement.

"Well, let's start," he would say, his voice sounding like the Last Trump.

Meek and sad, they would take their seats at the table, cast depressed looks at the squared pages of their exercise-books and plunge into the four rules of simple arithmetic.

But on Sundays, when he did not have to go to his office, the old man felt quite wretched. He could not very well make the little boys sit over their arithmetic on a Sunday—that science was invented for week-days. He would go into the kitchen and watch his wife and Varya knead dough or peel potatoes, and say it was time to seal the windows for the winter, or tell them what he had dreamed the night before and wander into another room. He grasped at

the slightest opportunity—moved the sofa to the wall or slipped a bit of wood under a table leg to stop the table rocking. When all his resources were exhausted and idleness fell upon him again he would walk over to the cat and engage it in endless conversation.

“Well, how are you, kitty?” he would ask as it rubbed lazily and casually against his foot. “What is it you want, eh? Why didn’t you catch that mouse? Kitty, kitty . . . what’s the matter? D’you want some sausage?” And on and on he would go until the cat grew tired of it and went into the kitchen.

But since Matveyev and Bezais had turned up in the house his days had acquired a new interest for him. The very fact that they were sheltering a couple of Bolsheviks, dangerous people who might be caught, gave him plenty of work to do. He had to go to the chemist’s, to carry the samovar to and fro, and box the children’s ears when they hung around Matveyev. Matveyev aroused his keenest interest. He questioned him about his life and did not want to believe that he was not someone out of the ordinary.

When Matveyev began to recover the old man announced that he would take care of him and see he didn’t get bored. At first Matveyev listened politely to his long stories and hoary jokes. Then they began to bore him. He taught himself to lie with an attentive expression on his face while he thought of his own matters. Now and again he slipped in at the right moment such meaningless phrases as:

“Fancy that. . . . I see, I see. . . .”

But sometimes his visitor was particularly insistent and then there was nothing to be done about him.

During his thirty years of navigation he had accumulated a mass of reminiscences and they sought an outlet. Matveyev was a real find for him.

Sometimes his wife joined them, bringing with her hot doughnuts with sour cream, curd tart, sweet cakes. Matveyev vaguely liked her but he paid her scant attention. He did not want to think either about Varya or her parents—he had his own things to think about and they were more important than all such trifles.

On that Sunday the floor in his room was scrubbed and a tall ficus carried in, the pot wrapped in coloured paper. Matveyev had got hold of a most stupid book called *The Convict Lord* and was indifferently reading its tattered pages. The book was about fifty years old and smelled of mice and mould. The old man came in after dinner, his face creased in smiles. Matveyev took one look at his simple face, meekly shut his book and endured his chatter in manly silence. Bezais came to the rescue a little later.

“Oh, of course, he’s a splendid fellow,” said Matveyev. “But I’m tired of him. It’s terribly difficult to listen to hackneyed stories that you’ve known since your childhood and to pretend you find them very funny and interesting. ‘Do you know the one about the lady engaging a footman?’ He winks and splits with laughter and I haven’t the heart to tell him I heard about that lady ten years ago and that I’m a little tired of her now. I’ve something to ask you, Bezais,” he concluded abruptly.

“What is it?”

“Oh, it’s nothing at all important,” said Matveyev,

putting his hands behind his head. "Nothing special. D'you remember that story I told you once?"

Bezais looked at him quizzically.

"About that girl?"

"Yes, about that girl."

"I see," said Bezais. "Well, what is it?"

Matveyev took his time to answer. He found it hard to start.

He rolled over on his back and, looking up at the ceiling, said that passion, love, women and all that were simply hindrances and nuisances to a man when he was busy fighting or working. Those women! They pestered you, they muddled your head with their blabbing.

He recalled one occasion when a member of the Gubernia Committee was kicked out of the Party over a woman. That had been in nineteen-eighteen—no, nineteen-nineteen. The man's name was Tyorkin. He'd forgotten what she was called. Zyablova, he thought.

But the names didn't matter.

All he wanted to say was that in our days women and all kinds of love nonsense—kissing and hugging and love-letters and all that sort of thing—just put a man off tack. When a man with a job to do falls in love his thoughts turn in a new direction. If he's sent to the front he has no inclination to go. If he's sent to another gubernia on Party work he's upset about having to leave his girl behind. Besides, love eventually breeds jealousy and that's the devil of a thing.

Bezais was listening very attentively and this embarrassed Matveyev. What was he talking like this for, he asked himself, but he could not stop now or change the conversation.

Well, all that was true. On the other hand, however, there were women and women. A woman could be a friend and comrade, she did not bind one's hands or interfere with one's work. On the contrary. Lisa Vrontsova was that sort.

He faltered again, surprised at his own thoughts. Here was he justifying himself before Bezais for being in love with Lisa. As if he'd done something dishonourable. And Bezais was listening like a criminal investigator.

"Well," said Bezais. "What else?"

"Nothing else," said Matveyev sharply. He was ashamed of himself for having said so much. "It's awfully boring lying here. I'd like to see her."

Bezais stood up, looking glum and thoughtful.

"So that's what you're getting at," he said. "No, we'd better not even talk about it. I'm not going to let you into the street. Anyway, you'd never manage to get that far."

Matveyev sat up in bed. He was a little on edge.

"I know. I haven't mentioned her before. I wanted to get up and go to her myself. But now I see this leg business is going to take a long time. I want to see her, very much, understand?"

"Love's a wicked thing," Bezais said. But the joke fell flat.

"I wish you or Varya would go and see her and tell her I'm here. Just that."

Bezais laughed.

"Varya? Are you suggesting she should go?"

"Well, you, then. But why can't Varya go?"

"Because ... because ..." said Bezais, rubbing his forehead, "because you're a silly chump."

NO' NEED TO WORRY

HE PROMISED Matveyev that he would go the following morning, after breakfast. But after breakfast he began to procrastinate and to look for pretexts to keep him in the house. After breakfast he had to smoke, and he did not enjoy smoking out of doors. Then he helped to look for the broom. When this had been found he got the idea of chopping firewood, but Varya's mother told him she did not need any. Then, with a sinking heart, he put on his coat, wasted a few minutes in Matveyev's room and went out.

His mission frightened him. For some time he had begun to take a keen interest in women and to experience a vague timidity in their presence. Everything outside the limits of normal conversation inspired fear in him—real, shameful, agonizing fear which made him feel disgusted with himself but which he could not get rid of. Above all he hated scenes. And on this occasion it seemed to him a scene was unavoidable.

A big red sun hung in the misty air. He walked along the steep bank of the river, whistling absent-mindedly. "A pretty kettle of fish," he kept repeating to himself.

He had a long way to go. He left the low, snow-clad houses of the suburbs far behind him, went down a steep flight of steps, crossed a gully and turned into a street. It was still early and there were few people about. Here and there men and women were clearing the pavements of the snow that had fallen during the night. Bezais climbed a hill and the panorama of Khabarovsk opened before him. Far away

on the horizon stretched the smooth white mirror of the river. To the left could be seen the boulevard above which towered a monument. The trees, hung with rime, stood motionless, like white clouds.

Bezais stood there for a while, taking an all-round view of the town. Then with a sigh he walked down towards it. At the cross-roads he saw a long-legged angular machine-gun and around it some soldiers in grey-green coats with shabby shoulder-straps. They were chewing cedar-nuts and exchanging remarks. Bezais turned into the side-street but found it full of carts. Two-wheeled military vehicles were strung out in a long line. Steam rose from the horses; tufts of hay trailed on the ground. There was a queue at the field kitchen and soldiers were carrying away steaming messtins. He walked past, forcing himself not to hurry. Now he felt calm about the Whites. It was all up with them—what did they matter here, at the end of the world, when the whole country was in the hands of others? Bezais walked past, feeling himself the master.

He reached a long empty street and stopped outside a single-story brick house with an attic window in the roof. A mangy old dog in the yard sniffed at his boots and let him by. He crossed a verandah, noting the broken panes of glass, and knocked on the front door. A slovenly dressed woman appeared before him in the dark corridor which smelt strongly of washing. She looked at him, her eyes frightened and questioning.

“Does Yelizaveta Fyodorovna Vorontsova live here?” Bezais asked. He felt a sudden hope that she might be out.

"Yes," the woman answered, eyeing him with strained attention.

"I have to see her."

The woman went away but returned in a moment.

"Perhaps it's Katerina Pavlovna you want?" she asked.

"No. I need Yelizaveta Fyodorovna."

She led him into a small room overlooking the garden. Bezais's heart began to beat fast; he cursed himself for such disgusting cowardice. This was Lisa's room—everything was simple and severe, like a man's room. Near the window stood a small ink-stained table and, near it, a narrow iron bed covered with a quilted blanket. But he was specially shocked by the untidiness and by the cigarette-ends strewn about the floor. On the table stood a lamp with a singed paper shade, below which a number of tattered books lay scattered. "Analytical Geometry," he read on one open page. A copper Chinese god showed its teeth in a grin from a shelf.

The door creaked behind him. His head shrank into his shoulders and he turned slowly to face Lisa.

Bezais had always imagined her to be very beautiful but now he was a little surprised. He saw a short, olive-complexioned girl with dark hair and lively eyes. Pretty, yes, but he had met many prettier.

She stood near the door looking at him with a question in her eyes.

"Good morning," she said.

Matveyev had been right—her eyes were really very beautiful.

Bezais rose abruptly to his feet.

"Good morning. I've come on business. Your ...

that ... that friend of yours ... you remember him, of course...."

She walked right up to him, her eyes slightly narrowing.

"Excuse me, what is your name?"

"Oh, that doesn't matter. As a matter of fact, it's Bezais."

He wanted to get the matter over and done with as soon as possible, hurry home and lounge on his bed with nothing on his mind.

"He sent me to you to say he was very sorry he couldn't come himself. You'll have to come to him, but it's quite near, don't worry. If you like, I can take you there now. If you're not busy, that is."

She went to a chair on which lay a heap of some kind of material, papers and matches and transferred it all to the floor.

"What did you say your name was?"

"Bezais. I've come from my friend, Matveyev."

"Is Matveyev here?" she asked, livening up.

"Yes."

"Then why didn't he come himself?"

He was silent, gathering courage to tell her the vital thing. Suddenly she went to the door and opened it. Bezais caught a brief glimpse of the woman who had let him in. She stood pressed to the door-post.

"Go away, Mother," said Lisa. "Hurry up."

"So you're Matveyev's comrade," she continued with a smile as she shut the door. "But why didn't he come himself?"

"He's not well. Wounded, rather."

Her eyes opened wide.

"Wounded?"

"There's no need to worry. It's not serious," he went on hurriedly. "He's almost fit again, honest he is. Don't worry, that's the main thing. Why, it'd be silly to worry now that he's almost fit."

She looked stunned. She didn't seem to understand.

"Where did they wound him?" she asked.

"In the leg. He was awfully lucky that it was the kind of wound that heals easily. Pull yourself together and don't get upset. He'll live to get married," he added with a silly laugh.

All the rest was like a long nightmare. He started telling her their adventures and on several occasions was about to tell her straight out that Matveyev had had a leg amputated, but every time he clutched at the opportunity to speak about something else—Zhu-kanov, Maiba, the road. She listened in silence, her eyes on his. Her eyes embarrassed him. They made him feel he was lying. At last he got tired of the sound of his own voice. After a long pause he said:

"They've amputated his leg below the knee."

She started as though he had struck her.

"Amputated?" she exclaimed through her sobs.

"Yes, amputated. Below the knee."

"Below the knee?"

Bezais raised his eyes. She looked horror-struck. She did not notice how her lips were trembling. She stood for a while without a word, breathing heavily.

"And now he's got only one leg."

"Yes."

"But how does he walk?"

"On crutches."

Never in his life had he felt worse. She took his hand and squeezed it till it hurt.

"Did he send you to me?"

"He did. He wants you to go to him."

"But how did it happen? Wasn't there anything that could have been done? Were you with him all the time?"

"Of course I was, all the time."

"And you couldn't do anything to help him?"

It was a direct reproach. He suddenly felt exasperated and tore his hand away.

"The wound began to fester. The doctor said he would die if they didn't amputate."

She sank into a chair. Bezais looked down at her hair with its middle parting.

"How stupid," she said, wringing her hands and swaying from side to side. "That it should happen to him of all people. There were three of you, weren't there?"

"Yes."

"How is he now? Is he up?"

"He can even move about the room a little."

She fell silent, thinking of something.

"He's quite helpless?"

"No, of course he isn't. He dressed himself the other day."

Bezais sat down, expecting the worst. He cast his eyes around the room, scratched himself behind the ear and rose.

"I'd better be going," he said, avoiding her eyes and spinning his hat in his hands. "Now I've told you everything."

He went into the passage, bumping in the darkness against Lisa's mother. He groped for the door,

then returned to the room. Lisa was sitting, her chest pressed to the edge of the table.

"I forgot to give you his address. Will you come to see him today?"

"I'll come tomorrow."

He went out into the street and unconsciously set out in the wrong direction. When he realized his mistake he turned back, hurried home and told Matveyev: "She's coming tomorrow." Then he went into his room, took off his boots and lay on the bed smoking hard. Somehow he had not made up his mind what to think about the business and his head was full of confused thoughts. The devil only knew whether it was good or bad.

He thought about Matveyev, about Lisa, about himself. How it was all going to end was a mystery. Only one thing was clear—a girl like Lisa was not to be met with every day.

SHE CRIED

NEXT morning Matveyev got up and, stumping about bravely on his crutches, went to ask the old man to lend him a razor. He managed somehow to shave himself and, seated before the mirror, examined his handiwork with approval.

He returned to his room whistling, cast a critical eye around and remained dissatisfied with the arrangement of the chairs. For half an hour he fussed about, shoving the chairs around noisily and straightening the frills on the curtain. This made him feel tired and he sat down, panting heavily. He was in high spirits and all the world smiled at him. After

resting he went into the dining-room and taught the little boys to play on a comb and a piece of cigarette paper. But Varya's mother came in, took away the comb and drove Matveyev back to his room.

The clock struck out one hour but Lisa did not come. The time dragged on slowly and he did not know how to spend it. Bezais, as usual, was out. Varya's mother brought him his lunch and stood at the door while he ate it, asking him whether he had a mother and how old she was and whether it was true that there was practically no difference between Bolsheviks and Communists. She complained that Varya wanted to cut her hair short. She thought it a silly idea. How could anyone like a woman with short hair?

And still Lisa did not come. When the big wheezy clock in the dining-room struck three Matveyev grew uneasy. He took his crutches and set off round the house, asking himself with sad perplexity what could have delayed her. He returned to his room and sat there till the evening. With every hour that struck he felt more certain that she was not coming. A gnawing pain like toothache came to harass him and he began to think that some accident must have happened to her. This idea was unbearable and when Varya came in he felt like smashing something.

She sat down beside him and told him he ought to eat more, to put on weight.

"Just say what you'd like to have," she said. "You always leave the soup untouched. If you like, we'll make you a chicken pie tomorrow. Mummy makes a lovely pie."

It was a most untimely occasion to talk about chicken pie.

"I don't want it," he said.

He looked at her out of the corner of his eye and noticed she had waved her hair. Lisa might have been arrested—those senseless blonde curls offended him.

"Let's change the subject," he said dryly. "Did you want to ask me something? You're always talking about cooking, as if there were nothing else in the world."

"Oh no, I just happened to mention it. What I really wanted to ask you is this—I've been thinking about it all day: When will the World Revolution take place?"

"On Wednesday," he snapped.

Recently Varya had developed a habit that irritated him constantly. She made an effort to talk about intellectual subjects: the Party, civilization, Ancient Greece. It was pitifully comic.

"Don't try to be cleverer than you really are," he said after a pause. "It's terribly irritating. You have no sense of proportion, you lay too much stress on all sorts of intellectual subjects. Keep them to yourself."

He avoided her eyes.

"It's simply flirting. Talk that way to Bezais. He'll be very pleased. But even when you're flirting you oughtn't to be so ponderous."

"Why do you think I'm flirting?"

"Well, let's say you're being coquettish. Why have you curled your hair?"

"I won't do it again," she said quietly.

He softened a little.

"You see, Varya, I don't feel quite myself just now. Don't pay any attention to it. But you're wrong to behave this way. It's funny. Surely you see that yourself. Be deeper and drop this provincial affectation. But let's drop the subject for today—I'm in a bad humour. Ask Bezais to come and see me when he gets back, will you, please?"

"Yes," she said submissively as she rose to her feet.

When Bezais came in Matveyev started a row. Matveyev asked him what news he had brought from the town and when Bezais told him there was none he flared up into a rage.

"I'm fed up with this, Bezais," he began in a loud voice, conscious that his lips were trembling. "It's disgusting, d'you realize? You're driving me to exasperation. Here am I sitting in this damned room without knowing a thing that's going on around. And you retail all sorts of nonsense to me. Why, I ask you? Are you making fun of me? I won't let you treat me like this, you beast!"

He almost shouted the last word.

Bezais sat down cautiously on the edge of a chair.

"It's not my fault, old man. It's all the doctor's fault. He said you weren't to get excited and I did the best I could. But now I see that all he knows what to do is to smear on iodine. He doesn't understand a thing about our business."

And he told Matveyev why he went out in the evenings and what he was doing. He felt he had kept his secret too long and that he could not keep his mouth shut any longer. Matveyev grew a little calmer and let Bezais finish without interruption.

"That's good," he said. "Look, I'll get up and we'll work on this job along together. Don't listen to the doctors, they're for women. I'd do away with all their medicine except mint-drops which, they say, are good for the hiccups. Beyond that I don't trust them the least bit. Tomorrow I'll go into the yard and see how Mother Nature's been getting along without me."

"No, you won't. The neighbours will see you and start talking. Be patient for a little longer."

Matveyev said nothing for a few moments. Then he smiled sheepishly.

"Does she live far from here?"

"Who?"

"Lisa."

"No, not very. A few blocks."

"Listen, you'll have to go and see her again."

"When?"

"Straight away. Something must have happened to her. You know how it is these days. What if she's been arrested? You see, she always keeps her promises. Please go, Bezais."

Bezais stood up.

"All right," he said in a crushed voice.

It was the worst punishment he could have imagined. But he had to go: Matveyev would have done the same for him, had he been in a similar situation. He went out and wasted a couple of hours. When he returned a conversation took place which, later, he could not recall without great remorse. From that day he solemnly vowed to himself never to get mixed up in anyone else's private affairs.

He tiptoed through the dark rooms—the family had gone to bed. Matveyev was waiting for him sitting up in bed, smoking hard.

“Did you see her?” he asked impatiently.

“Yes,” said Bezais. “Everything’s all right.”

“What did she say?”

“She said she couldn’t come today. She’s coming tomorrow.”

“Why couldn’t she come today?”

“She must have had something to do. I don’t know.” Matveyev was puzzled.

“What did she ask you to tell me?”

“That she’ll come tomorrow.”

“Is that all? Nothing else?”

“No, I think that was all.”

“Think, Bezais, think hard. You’ve probably forgotten.”

It sounded like a plea. Bezais cleared his throat and said in a hollow voice:

“Well . . . she asked me to say . . . well, that you’re nice of course.”

“Aha . . .”

“That she’s dying to see you. Feeling terribly lonesome. You know, all kinds of girls’ talk.”

“Aha . . .”

“Well . . . and that’s all.”

“But what did she say about me?”

“Oh, nothing particular.”

“Was she worried?”

“Well . . .”

He raised his eyes and saw the faint smile die on Matveyev’s face. In its place came a look of perplexity. He had intended to tell Matveyev how brave and

progressive Lisa was, but now he realized that that wasn't at all what Matveyev wanted to hear from him.

"Did she cry when you told her about . . . everything?"

Matveyev was looking at him with hopeful expectation, imploring him, almost. Bezais could not stand it. He decided to take the plunge. What difference did it make?

"Cry? It was a regular downpour," he replied, looking Matveyev straight in the eye. "I begged her to stop but what could I do, after all? They're all alike."

"Word of honour?"

"Of course."

Matveyev settled back against the wall and laughed heartily.

"She's a wonderful girl, Bezais, good God she is," he said proudly. "You'll be surprised when you know her better. So she cried, did she?"

"I should say so."

"There's a silly girl for you. The first time in her life, I expect."

There was a pause.

"How do you like her?"

"She's not bad. She'll pass."

"She's pretty, don't you find?"

"Oh, yes."

"And where did you meet her?"

"In her room."

"I see. What were her first words when she saw you?"

"She said: 'Good evening.'"

"And what did you say?"

"I said: 'Good evening,' too."

"H'm. I expect she was in a brown dress with polka dots."

"No. She was wearing a blue dress without any dots on it."

Bezais looked down at the floor with a surly expression but Matveyev paid no heed to this. He was bursting to go on talking.

"No one knows what his fate is," he said with a smile. "Remember, how I tried to make you take my ticket that evening? What a silly chump I was! Why, if I hadn't gone I'd never have met her. Chance. I often think of that nowadays and feel grateful to you for staying at home. So you really liked her?"

"She's all right."

"I thought you'd like her. I suppose I've got an awfully silly look on my mug now, haven't I?"

"No, not very."

"Y-es. Well, you see, old man, there's the new woman for you, in the full sense of the word. When I talk to Varya I feel like chewing hay. No taste, nothing at all. Don't feel hurt. She'll bind you hand and foot and cramp your style all the time."

"To tell the truth," said Bezais with an irony that only he could appreciate, "she doesn't bother me very much."

"Well, maybe not. Everyone gets what he's looking for. You haven't the taste for it. To come-together and give each other the best you have to give, and then part when need be, without any sentimentality! It's a physical feeling. Words have nothing to do with it. Well, so she said she'd come tomorrow."

"That's what she said."

The clock struck two. Bezais turned down the lamp and went to his room.

PEOPLE DON'T DIE OF IT

SHE really did come the next day.

It was a day that might have been made out of glass, so brittle was the cold brilliance of the light. The ice on the window-frame was a pure blue, the sky blue too, a slightly darker shade, the snow the palest of blue, the colour of crisp fresh linen. Through the ventilation window the air curled into the room, stirring the curtains. Matveyev dressed, shrinking from the cold. He was overwhelmed with a feeling of impatient joy; he wanted to whistle and snap his fingers. When Bezais came in, Matveyev said abruptly:

"I've decided to give you my knife."

A moment earlier he had not thought of the knife. The idea came into his head suddenly, the second Bezais opened the door.

"Why?"

"Oh, for nothing."

"But that means you won't have a knife."

"It doesn't matter. I'm tired of it."

The knife had a bone handle and a dark sheath and was remarkably strong. Matveyev had taken it off a White officer near Nikolayev and had carried it in his pocket ever since. He used it to open tins, sharpen pencils and trim his finger-nails.

Bezais coloured with pleasure.

"Strange."

"Not at all strange."

Matveyev drew the knife, breathed on the sharp blade and showed Bezais how quickly the film of vapour faded from the metal.

"Something to remember me by."

Varya came in. She and Bezais sat a long time in Matveyev's room, but he soon stopped noticing them and behaved as if he were alone in the room. They left. He lay on his bed, smoking and reading *The Convict Lord* without taking in a word of it. Several hours passed that way. He listened with sharpened attention to footsteps in the dining-room, to the clink of knives and plates, in mortal fear that the old man would descend on him with his inexhaustible chatter. Patches of sunshine danced about the room.

Finally the door opened a few inches and revealed Varya's mother's round face, burning with impatience and curiosity. Behind it Matveyev saw a familiar squirrel hat. His heart stopped beating.

"There's a lady here asking for you."

He tossed the book aside and tried to rise, but to do that he had to get to the other end of the bed where his crutches stood. Smiling cheerfully he waved his hand. Lisa stood at the door. Her dark-complexioned face, rosy from the frost, looked so familiar and sweet.

"Well, take your coat off," he said. They were the first words that came into his head and he regretted having spoken them the moment they left his lips. After a whole month's separation he ought to have said something else.

She came towards him slowly. Smiling, Matveyev kept his eyes on her pink face, her coat collar covered with rime. She had looked just like that at Chita, the first evening they met. Was it really a month ago? He

looked at her, recalling that frosty, starlit night, the resonant crunch of their footsteps, their first clumsy kisses. But she still said nothing. Matveyev felt he had to speak.

"How do I look? You know, you haven't changed a bit."

She rubbed her cheek nervously.

"You have a lot," she replied.

He trembled at the sound of her voice.

"Come on, kiss me," he said imploringly.

She came close and kissed him on the lips. For a moment he buried his face in the cold collar of her coat. He could have sat like that for a whole hour but she drew herself up.

"Slip off your coat," he said, glowing with an inner warmth that made his neck and ears red. "What's the idea, standing there?"

She removed her coat and hat. He noticed that she was dressed exactly as she had been on that first occasion—in a high-necked blouse with an embroidered collar and belt, a dark skirt with big pockets. It occurred to him that she had dressed that way to please him, and again the colour rushed to his face.

"What a nice room," she said after a moment's silence.

"Yes, of course. How did you stain your blouse?"

"Making soup. Are you still in pain?"

"No, not in the least."

"When were you wounded?"

He felt a sudden impulse to tell her how it had happened—how they had been stopped, how the horses had jerked and dashed on throwing up the snow. The turbid sky, the deafening shots and that ridicu-

lous dog that had barked at the sledge—the whole picture rose before his eyes and for a second wiped out Lisa and the room. But she broke in with:

“Why didn’t you send for me earlier?”

“I wanted to come to you myself,” he said, looking at her neck and struggling with his thoughts. “But they wouldn’t let me out of this place. D’you remember how we kissed in the corridor that time, and we were noticed?”

She gave a forced smile.

“Does the doctor come to see you?”

“Yes, now and again. Sit a bit closer, won’t you? I get so bored here that I feel like howling. There’s an old lunatic who comes in to see me every day and badgers me with jokes that are at least a hundred years old. Did you miss me?”

“I was terribly worried.”

“I was too. Bezais is a good chap but he doesn’t understand a thing. He’s like a stump. I loll in bed thinking about you all day long. What’s the name of that street in Chita, where the hostel is? Argunskaya? Oh, you *are* pretty.”

She raised her eyes and looked at his beaming face. It was so thin and there were dark shadows under his eyes. A month ago he had looked quite different.

“But tell me, how do you feel now?”

“Not so bad. In a week or two we’ll go on and you’ll come along with us. Oh, I forgot to tell you something funny.... But may I kiss you? Or don’t I have to ask?”

He kissed her hard, regretting only that the kisses were so short.

“Yes, it’s very odd. Sometimes, when I’m thinking

about something, I have a quite definite feeling that a toe on the foot they amputated is aching. On my left foot."

"Your toe hurts?" she said, mastering her horror.

"I blistered it," he said soothingly. "It's just a trick of the imagination. So you were worried, dear? Silly Lisa. What could have happened to me?"

He faltered.

"Well, as a matter of fact, something did," he said with an embarrassed smile. "As you see. But it's nothing, really, is it? It's not going to keep me out of things, oh no. Worse things can happen to a man. I'm almost fit again."

"Really?"

"Yes, of course I am. I get along on one leg. Would you like me to show you?"

"No, don't," she said rapidly, but Matveyev, with a confident laugh, took his crutches and rose. He headed for the window and hobbled there and back, the crutches thumping noisily on the floor. Lisa stood up.

"How's that?" he asked, smiling.

"Very good," she said, crushing her fur hat into a ball. "But it's time I left, dear."

He sat down and looked up at her.

"Why?" he asked in the manner of a child who has had a sweet taken away from it.

"I dropped in only for a minute," she said, lowering her lashes. "I must be at home today."

Matveyev surrendered to her "must." He was quite incapable of arguing with her.

"Perhaps you'll come again later today, when you're free?"

She came up to him and embraced him tenderly.

"Don't be lonely," she whispered, kissing him on the cheek. "I'll come and spend all day with you tomorrow—I promise."

"On the lips, please." That was all he could find to say.

And so she stood beside him, holding his head and running her fingers through his hair. He kissed her rapidly, wildly, kissed everything that his lips found, kissed her with voracity of a hungry man—her neck, her hands, her face. His passion was fanned by the tender warmth of her body. How long had he been waiting for this moment! In the train, the forest, the dark Khabarovsk streets he had dreamed of those unique brows and the tender dimple on her neck.

Suddenly he felt she was trembling, as her head rested on his shoulder. This was something unusual.

"What's the matter, Lisa?" he asked in alarm and drew her down beside him on the edge of the bed.

He waited a little and then decided to resume right where he had left off. He was already caressing her neck when she turned away from him. Matveyev's lips slid to somewhere near her ear.

"I want to talk to you," she said, drawing a deep breath.

He grasped her fingers and squeezed them hard. She was sitting shoulder to shoulder with him and he saw her profile with the long lashes.

"What about?"

"About our relations."

She was worried—worried about him!—and this filled Matveyev with a crude joy.

"Go on, go on," he said indulgently.

"All right—I'll tell you in a minute," she demurred, freeing her hand gently. "I'll kiss you once more and then I'll tell you."

For a few minutes she kissed him with her eyes closed, kissed him ardently and fast, as he had never been kissed by anyone before.

"Well, it's this," she said feelingly. "I want . . . but you mustn't be offended, dear. Try to understand me. Our relations . . . you see, we can't go on as before. I'm not coming with you to the Maritime Region."

She sighed with relief but had not the courage to raise her eyes.

"You must realize yourself how it is. I know you're thinking now that I'm behaving rottenly. But, my dear, you must understand that I'm suffering too. I could have not come to see you at all—just sent you a note. But will you understand me, that I don't know."

Matveyev's silence began to alarm her. With an effort she raised her eyes to his. He looked exactly as though he had been dealt a blow. There was a vague smile on his lips which pierced her like a knife. She felt on the verge of tears; a tender sense of pity for him overwhelmed her. It was not love, that feeling which still quivered within her—it was half-fear, half-perplexity. "It's hard for me too," she told herself, and the words revived a memory.

It was at Chita before she left. They were roaming the town. He was holding her by the arm and listening to her ardent, confused words about their future love. "One must know how to put a full stop in time," she said, "before one gets in one another's way."

"I understand. One must know how to put a full stop in time," he said now, echoing her thoughts.

She was frightened by the look on his face. She felt he was going to ask her something.

"If you could only realize how hard it is for me," she said plaintively.

He said nothing.

"Let's talk about it calmly," she went on. "If I'm not going to be happy with you, you'll certainly feel that yourself. There's no need for any sacrifices."

He said something under his breath.

"I can't stand it any longer," she whispered helplessly.

Someone in the next room called the cat in a loud voice and tried to persuade it to come from under the sideboard. A dusty sunbeam pierced the room and broke into green sparks on a glass vase.

"But you're not angry with me, are you?"

He drew a deep breath, like a man about to plunge from a great height. Life stood before him—Life with a capital L, and he gathered all his forces in order to look into its blank eyes. For twenty years he had walked into life fit and healthy and no one had blocked his path. Now he had lost a leg and he had to make room. Well, what was to be done about it?

"I'm not a kid," he said a little hoarsely. "And I know why boys love girls."

She took his hand and pressed it to her cheek.

"Try to understand me, dear. I feel so badly about this, I feel so sorry for you."

He had but one wish—to bear up till the end, not to give in, not to break down. That was some slight, very slight consolation. There was no other. It was like the cigarette a man smokes before execution. This too was a sort of execution, but he was going to do

everything he could to bear up. It was his last act but he meant to play it properly.

"You're attaching too much importance to this," he said, almost calmly.

"Really?" she said in relief.

"Well, it's not going to kill me, you know."

"I thought it best to be frank."

"Of course, you were quite right."

"But you will suffer, all the same, won't you?"

The cards were down. He had to play the game to the end.

"No," he said to his own surprise. "Of course, I'm sorry our little affair didn't last, but what can one do? You needn't worry about me."

"Little affair, did you say?" she repeated slowly.

"It won't kill me."

She stiffened and tossed her head.

"I didn't sleep all night. I was making up my mind that was the worst. I shall never forget it."

He had to get this over as quickly as possible.

"To tell the truth," he said, looking her bravely in the eye, "I was a bit tired of the affair myself. It had gone on too long—two whole months."

She rose to her feet.

"What did you say? Tired of it?"

"Yes."

"Is that so? That's news to me."

"Well, as you like."

"I thought you loved me."

"H'm. I didn't know you attached so much importance to that."

She clasped her hands nervously.

"That's not true," she said excitedly. "It's not true, d'you hear? You loved me all the time. You did, didn't you?"

The blood beat hotly at his temples. What nonsense this all was—of course he had loved her, and loved her at this moment more than ever.

"A little," he said, with all that remained of his strength.

"That's not true, Matveyev."

"I was simply having a bit of fun. There was nothing else to do in Chita."

"You're inventing that now."

"If you like to think so."

He was surprised to see that she was crying.

"How foul!" she said violently. "So you treated me like a plaything. You were making fun of me. And I was so worried coming to you today."

She had been worried! Matveyev looked at her hungrily and reflected bitterly on his comic and stupid fate. But he didn't want to appear comic.

"I'm not better or worse than other men in this sinful world. I smelt something good and wanted to taste it," he said in the manner of a hardened libertine.

Her brows arched high and for some moments she looked at him as though seeing him in a new light.

"However," she said slowly, feeling humiliated and profoundly unhappy, "I never thought I was such a fool. I hope everything's over between us."

"Everything's over," he said, as though he was pulling a trigger.

When she had left he sat for a long time on his bed, clasping his knees, lost in his thoughts. He thought

more about himself than about her, and everything seemed to him new and strange and frightening.

He patted his mutilated leg, looked at his crutches and sighed. Funny, somehow he hadn't thought about that before. He should have foreseen it—after all, it would have been strange if a pretty young girl had married him when there were so many strong-limbed fellows about. . . . Now his place was in the rear—and it was she who had pointed that out to him.

PERFORMANCE POSTPONED

IN A DAY or two he found out what real boredom is. It was like being ill. Every hour pressed on him unbearably heavily and by the end of the day he felt a broken man as if he'd been engaged in heavy manual labour. He slept badly, his temperature rose. Varya said he was feverish but Matveyev knew the real reason. Bezais made an honest attempt to cheer him up and invented all kinds of games which made boredom altogether intolerable. He was knocked flat. He spent his time lying on his back, his face turned up to the ceiling. Once he humiliated himself to the extent of building card houses. Bezais brought him a pack and they played a game called The Drunkards. They played a few hands but Bezais laughed so conscientiously that Matveyev flung down the cards.

"This is a game for merry souls," he said with a shake of the head. "They play it when they've nothing else to do in the graveyard. Go away, Bezais, I think I'll get to sleep now."

He rolled on his side and lay for a few hours determined not to move until he went to sleep. But even his dreams bored him.

When Lisa left the room he thought everything was over but it turned out that that was only the beginning of the business. Never in his life had he loved anyone so. What had they meant to him, those girls from whom he had snatched a few hurried kisses in the corridors of clubs, his light-hearted sins and his first secrets?

Love, well, everyone was in love at times: people, flowers, horses. There was nothing special about that. But his love was too highly spiced for his taste. Now he recalled with real repugnance his damned reasoning about love and women, and all those cold, wise things he had been so comically proud of. He would like to find the man who had invented all those things. He'd kill him. They were all very well until things went wrong for a fellow, until what he really needed was simple, warm words. For every man's life had its black days ready, and however happy and bold he is, he cannot avoid his own sorrow.

A comrade? Well, of course, comrade is a fine word, as old as the world, perhaps. Better than anything else people have ever thought of. But somehow he could not go to Bezais and tell him how life had struck him down and trampled on him with its heavy boots. It's not good when one man goes to another to implore for consolation; that's womanish; it was quite impossible, in fact, because Bezais would have nothing to say. "Damn it all," is all he would say, pulling his ear in a worried way as he sought for the suitable phrase.

Matveyev had his own view on such matters. It was best to keep things to oneself and not involve others in them.

And that was another stupid, wretched business—those short-haired women with their talk of sexual problems. If you approach those problems in an honest, human way, you find they don't exist at all. It was all nothing more than exciting, teasing talk about shameful, forbidden things, neurotic talk. His trouble was that he had believed it with all his heart.

In the evening of the following day Bezais burst into the room.

"Come and join us, old man," he said. "D'you know what I've thought of? I've persuaded the fellows to hold their meeting here. Would you like to listen?"

"When are they coming?"

"They're here."

"All right."

He lay for a spell, convincing himself to get up and not be lazy. Then he dressed reluctantly and went into the dining-room. At once he found himself enveloped in a low buzz of conversation and laughter. Through a haze of tobacco smoke he saw vague unfamiliar faces and glowing cigarette-ends. There were five men there besides Bezais who was moving crockery about noisily on the table and was obviously proud of the honour of pouring tea at a clandestine meeting. On a clean table-cloth stood a samovar, cups and a plump home-baked loaf with a pinkish crust. Matveyev greeted the men and sat down. No one spoke for a while and then they all started together, and again the thick blue cloud of tobacco smoke drifted waveringly about the room.

"Who likes it strong?" asked Bezais. "Don't take that chair, it's only got three legs."

A short squint-eyed man reported on the situation at the front. This was Comrade Chuzhoi. His news was stale and he seemed to be retailing it mainly for himself, for the rest were scarcely listening. They drank their tea and talked among themselves in low voices, except for one black-bearded man who did not say a word and stared straight ahead, lost in his thoughts. He sat with his heavy strong body sprawling carelessly and held a cigarette between his short fingers. His beard gave him a patriarchal appearance.

Sitting beside him was a middle-aged man who was drinking his tea from the saucer which he held balanced on his finger-tips. He had nothing to say himself and hurriedly agreed with whatever anyone else said. In a corner of the room sat a young, good-looking fellow; Matveyev felt his brown eyes on him. The fifth member of the group was hidden by the samovar. Only part of one shoulder and one ear stuffed with cotton wool were visible.

Matveyev sat looking at them in turn and waiting for something to happen, the way it is at meetings where people begin by talking about dull, unimportant matters because the main thing is so enormously important that it is difficult to start with it straight away. He felt that the flower-patterned cups, the home-baked loaf, the placid samovar, had been put out in the room in order to conceal the really important thing that was lurking outside the window, in the darkness, on the empty streets of the sleeping town. Yes, and these people were sitting here as though in disguise, as though they had dropped in at a friend's house for

a cup of tea and a chat about peaceful everyday trivialities. Only in a slight trembling of the fingers, in a fleeting gleam in the eyes could one sense that ardent blood brotherhood in which people stake their lives.

Chuzhoi's face was immobile, his voice quite inexpressive. As he spoke Matveyev made several vain attempts to listen. He was talking about some telegraph station—that they ought to send their own man there, or, on the contrary, remove him. Or perhaps he was not saying that at all, for the words slipped past Matveyev's ears and melted like fluffy snow. Bezais went on pouring tea with ridiculous solemnity, watching Matveyev out of the corner of his eye as he did so.

At last Chuzhoi came to an end; after a considerable pause someone asked him a question that interested nobody, and he answered exhaustively and conscientiously. He was followed by the man behind the samovar who evidently spoke about the substance of the matter. Hotly, tripping over the words, he proved something, but Matveyev had no idea what—he didn't know the town or the location of the forces or the latest news. He only caught snatches of the man's impassioned speech.

"The organization has been smashed," he said. "There is no liaison, no discipline, damn it all, nothing. We're not getting any information, no correct facts at all—our people are gathering stale rumours. I'm tired of talking about it. Instead of planned work the comrades are getting involved in risky business. Who thought of that raid on the town? Why was it necessary? To frighten the Whites? Very clever! But we

risked our contacts, people, the whole apparatus of our work. It brought the organization under the axe, and what for? The first thing we have to do is to gather our forces, to start agitation, put up posters. Kukharenko's mad. Let him derail trains, but why should he stick his nose into the town?"

Then he reeled off a whole batch of titles, names, and regimental numbers that confused Matveyev completely.

Next to speak was the black-bearded man whose name was Nikola. He pressed his vast chest against the edge of the table and, beard bristling, boomed in the deep voice of a choir-singer. As he spoke the whites of his eyes flashed angrily under their heavy lids. From time to time he struck the table with the palm of a hand as big as a saucer and that made the spoons tinkle against the cups.

"What is our line now?" he hooted. "We're counting on them not lasting. This is their last stake. If we thought they'd last long then there'd be some sense in running an underground and going in for propaganda. But they'll be down today or tomorrow. The Japs are already preparing to evacuate. The front is smashed, they're reeling back. So now the main work is military. They're hard pressed near Bekin, so we ought to sow panic in their rear, muddle them up, mix their cards. This is no time for propaganda circles. Kukharenko is a hothead, he might make trouble. You say we're only frightening them? Well, what's wrong with that? We ought to frighten them. We can't let them evacuate quietly. And just think what'll happen at the front when reports get through that there's firing going on with the Reds in Khabarovsk!"

His voice thundered like the bass notes of the piano. He leaned back in his chair and took them all in with his eyes, champing his jaws like a cannibal. No one spoke. At length Chuzhoi said:

"I heard that the Forty-Second had been withdrawn from Dupeli. It's not known where it will be put. Maybe in the gap, if there's time."

"The Forty-Second has already left the front altogether."

Someone laughed.

"When did it go?"

"Last week. And you've only just found out about it."

"But where did that train come from?"

"From Iman, yesterday. All freight, with military supplies."

"It'd be a good thing to let Kukharensko know, so that he can keep an eye on it."

"Forty vans—that's big stuff. If they go up there won't be anything left of the depot."

"As if we cared!"

"The last time, when that business with the Japanese train took place, everything was in the hell of a mess. Why? Because we acted like a herd of cattle. I ran to Petka Sinitsyn and he'd gone off to the depot workers. Then he started looking for me, and the men who were supposed to set the fuse disappeared somewhere. Whose fault was it? No one's. Some stranger's. We can't work that way."

"We must keep contact. We've talked about that twenty times but it's like talking to a blank wall."

"Arguing again!"

"Do you insist on what you said, Comrade Kaverin?"

"I'm not insisting on anything."

"What a time to argue! What are we arguing about anyway? It's a matter of words."

"We must settle the main question: Are we going to attack or not? What are we playing around for? We must know how to obey orders."

The room had grown stuffy but for safety's sake the ventilation pane was kept closed. The water gurgled in the samovar. The table was strewn with cigarette-ends and crusts of bread; spilt tea lay in dark patches. Someone had singed the cloth and in his embarrassment slid a glass over the hole.

"I am for attacking. Kaverin says it means putting the organization under the axe. Well, what of that? We must know how to sacrifice men. War wouldn't be war without that. And we must come to final agreement so that there won't be any more talks like this."

Now Matveyev was listening, not letting a word slip. He had the feeling of being back in his own old home. Everything was so familiar, the words too—the hard, keenly whetted words of fighting-men. Somewhere in the past he had sat listening in at a meeting exactly like this, had breathed in the heated air saturated with danger.

He bent his head and gulped down some cold tea. His hands were trembling. We'll show them what we're made of yet, he thought, trying to repress his excitement. At Kalach, during one of Mamontov's raids, he and the others had got by chance into a cavalry unit. He had slung a sabre and carbine over his shirt and ridden into action. The sky had been aflame with blinding light when they trotted out on to the battle-field. The wormwood rustled crisply un-

der the horses' hooves; the air was dim with dust and heat-haze. Matveyev's heavy mount was in a frenzy. He saw before him the line of the trenches, and his heart palpitated with joy and impatience, like a sabre gleaming in his hand....

"We must strike together, at one point. The Fifth Company is composed almost entirely of Tatars."

"Nonsense."

"What about the composite regiment?"

"It's scattered all over the town."

"Tomorrow we'll send one of our liaison men to Kukharenko. So as to avoid a mix-up we'll allocate duties in advance. You'd better tame that fool of yours, the dark fellow. The last time he went quite crazy. We'll attack in several places at the same time. They'll make their main blow at the goods station. With any luck that ammo train will be blown up."

"Dangerous."

"Why?"

"It's a whole train, after all. Forty vans."

"Oh, what a show it would be!"

"We'll concentrate our main forces on their headquarters. That's going to be dangerous. We'll have to select our best men. Then we'll have to allocate a group of five to cut the telephone cable. We can entrust that to Komsomols, girls even. They won't be so easily noticed."

"I'm against it, let me say again. Especially after the experience we've had. How did we lose Sayechnikov? For a mere trifle. But if you've made up your mind to do it I propose you take the following measures: first, simultaneously with the attack on their

headquarters we must attack the reconnaissance and, above all, try to rescue Protasov and Berman."

"Agreed."

"Secondly, as regards liaison. Each group ought to be responsible for providing its own liaison man. Why, it's enough to make a cat laugh, the way we chase after each other, as if we were playing tag."

"Something ought to be done about the posters too. I noticed some of the appeals of the People's Revolutionary Committee the day before yesterday. One was pasted face to the wall, others were upside down."

"I'll look after the headquarters," said Nikola.

Then Matveyev remembered where it had been. In 1920 the detachment had been chasing Cossacks of Svekolkov's band. It was snowing and the grey murky light swallowed up the line of advancing men. Near a monastery a machine-gun spat fire at them. The bullets hungrily sought human flesh. The line was advancing against the wind, and when a burst of fire came suddenly from the flank, the men stopped and flopped on to the snow. Death was so close that one could have touched it with one's hand. The commissar rode up on a weary horse, called to the commander and said through the biting wind:

"I'll look after the left flank...."

And now he remembered all that. There had been many such days and nights in the past and they called to him with a thousand voices. He expanded his chest. This was just what he had been waiting for. He had to take the road that lay before him and do his job. Then he could face his fate boldly. And his fate was here, a desperate fate that marched in step with the rest, as soldiers march.

When all rose from the table and formed a bunch as they sought their hats and coats, Matveyev went up to Nikola and drew him aside.

"What about me?" he asked a little shyly.

Nikola looked at him dubiously.

"But ... er ... you have this ... er ... you're not fit."

"I am. Almost."

"But your ... er ..."

"My leg? It bothers me a bit."

"Look, this isn't going to be easy work."

"Never mind. I've known worse. And, really, I'm not so bad."

Nikola mopped his brow and tore his eyes away from Matveyev's leg.

"D'you know what? Wait until you are a bit better. Then we'll see."

"I'm not going to grow a new leg," Matveyev demurred with a nervous shrug. "It's nothing. Take me as I am. With my crutches. Give me any kind of work, it's all the same to me."

"That's just the point. There isn't any suitable work."

"Impossible. Give me something unsuitable. Don't look at my leg, it doesn't matter."

Matveyev began to worry. Nikola's round face remained unmoved and he realized that it was not going to be easy to get at him.

"But that's not the main point. Surely there must be some job I could do. Putting up posters, for instance? Then I could go with the others to cut the cable. You said it's work that even girls could do. Surely I'm as good as them."

He held his breath with a desperate effort and looked

Nikola in the eye, waiting for him to reply. Damn it, he is a stubborn beast, he thought.

Nikola shifted his weight cautiously.

"Really, I don't know what to say," he said hesitantly.

Matveyev leaned closer to him.

"What you mean," he said in a hurt tone, "is that I'm no good for anything."

"I didn't say that."

"But that's what you think. I can see that."

"What I think is that you ought to have a good long rest."

"I've been lying in bed for weeks. But what's that got to do with you? Tell me straight—will you take me or not?"

His temper was rising. This was his last trump; he could not restrain his rising voice.

"It's not a thing to be decided all at once. But don't get so excited about it."

"And don't you try to wriggle out of it. It's up to the doctors to talk about illness and so on. I'm fed up with sitting here. If your answer is no, then say so straight away."

He read the verdict in Nikola's dark eyes. Horror struck him like a blow on the chest.

"No," said Nikola.

"No?"

A vision of horses trampling the wormwood, of blinding sabres, of yellow dust, flashed before his eyes. He felt frightened: his last hope was being shattered, and he clutched at it with both hands.

"But maybe you could find something, after all?" he asked, meek and humiliated.

Nikola shook his head.

Then Matveyev lost his temper completely. Something snapped in him, like a string. Later on, it made him feel horribly ashamed of himself to recall what he had said. But every man has the right to fly into a rage once in his life, and Matveyev's hour had struck.

"You think I'm good for nothing, don't you?" he said chokingly. "That I'm on the shelf?"

That was how he started, but after that he called Nikola a scoundrel and upset a glass and said he didn't care a damn about anything. He wanted to complain somewhere and uttered threats that he didn't understand himself. He caught a glimpse of the reddening face of Bezais who sat playing with the fringe of the table-cloth. But it was far too late to stop and he went on until he had exhausted his stock of senseless insults. He felt like smashing something. He paused for a moment's thought and added quite out of the blue:

"I've been in the Party since 1918."

Only then did he notice that everyone was watching him in silence. But he did not care. To hell with everything! He had only one wish: to grasp Nikola by the shoulders and shake the life out of him. His sense of helplessness had never been such agony to him before.

Nikola looked down and moved a cigarette-end on the floor with the toe of his boot.

"Take offence, if you like," Matveyev went on, panting hard. "I don't care a damn. But I'll show you yet."

Nikola took him by the arm.

"You know what I shall tell you?" he said in a quiet voice so that the others should not hear. "You're a hot-

head, but I'm not offended. If you insist on my being quite frank I'll tell you."

"I don't insist on anything," demurred Matveyev, trying to break free of the other's grip on his arm. "It's all the same to me. I don't care a damn."

Nikola drew him into a corner, not relaxing his grasp on his arm. Matveyev looked dispassionately at his thickset figure. He had spoken the truth: it was all the same to him.

"Listen, my lad," Nikola began. "You're a Communist. Well, you're given a job to do, something that has to be done whatever the cost. A Party job, you understand? Dangerous, too. You'll do your very best to do that job as well as you can, won't you? And then a fellow comes up to you and says: 'Take me along too.' Would you take him if he was going to be a hindrance? Yes, a hindrance. You wouldn't take him even if he were your own brother. The job has its own law which doesn't permit it. Well, that's how it is with this job. If this was a personal job, then I'd have taken you. But it's Party work, and so I shan't take you. Not because I haven't the right to or because I'm afraid you'd be killed, but because you'd be a hindrance to everyone."

"But I don't see how I could be a hindrance."

"It's very simple. This is not going to be a game. We are going to fight. And you can't fight, that's clear. Don't take offence now. That means someone would have to take care of you. You wouldn't be able to run far on crutches, which means you'd hold the others back. Understand me and drop the idea. After all, you're a Party member and you know what this kind of work is like."

Matveyev shrank. He freed his arm, turned on his heels and went to the door with a feeling that all eyes were on his back.

His room lay in deep gloom except where the moonlight cast a few orange patches. He bumped his elbow against the corner of the table but only felt the pain five minutes later. Reaching his bed he sat down feeling that he had been robbed of something.

He sat there for about an hour, until everything grew quiet in the next room.

Then he drew his revolver from under the pillow and turning to the window looked into the barrel. "How are you?" he muttered. The barrel looked back at him faithfully. The revolver had a simple, honest soul, the kind that big, strong dogs sometimes have. It had helped Matveyev several times in the past, in the good days, and it was ready to help him now.

After all, weren't there occasions when it was better to make one's exit. What good was he—a cripple—to anyone now, when even his own people had passed him by? He was accustomed to live a full life and to march ahead of others, but they had asked him to stand aside and not be a hindrance to them.

He stared at the revolver. It was hard to resort to it, as hard as throwing away some old, broken thing you had long grown used to. Death was a bad business, whatever people said.

"I'm not used to this," he muttered, fingering the trigger.

He lifted his hand to splash out life with one gesture as one splashes water out of a glass. This was a bad way out but, after all, he wasn't boasting of it.

But evidently he possessed some power that had ac-

cumulated over the years but whose presence he had not suspected before that day. In a square of moonlight on the floor he caught sight of his shadow with the revolver raised to his temple and at once he remembered broken phrases about cowardice, theatricality, unpleasant flirtations with death and so on, and this banal pose of the suicide struck him as comic. This kind of death was endlessly vulgarized in the columns of the press and in idle tea-table chatter all over the world. Anyway he had always considered suicide the worst of deaths. He sat for a few moments eyeing his shadow and scratching his chin indecisively. Then he carefully took his finger off the trigger. After all, a man can always find time to shoot himself through the head.

"The performance is postponed," he whispered to himself as he drew the blanket over him.

I'M NOT AS BAD AS ALL THAT

THE MORNING was dull and grey, and the pine branch outside the window swayed in the wind. Matveyev awoke with a heavy head and lay in bed late, trying to make out what the time was.

Then he got up, dressed lazily and began wandering about the house. The heavy stump of his crutches got on his nerves. He went to Varya's mother, wheedled some strips of cloth out of her and spent a long time binding the ends of the crutches. This helped to kill an hour and a half, but the whole day still lay before him. He went back to his room and pulled out old letters, notes, documents, scraps of paper—all the rubbish which accumulates in one's pockets—and began to

go through them. It was boring at first but after a while he managed to persuade himself that it was interesting. He found jottings on some theses, scraps of travel impressions and lines of verse on the German Revolution so bad that they made him smile. How could he have written such trash? On a crumpled sheet of paper with drawings of little houses, horses and faces in profile there were the opening lines of a letter to Lisa:

"My dear," he read. "We've been standing still at a station for three hours and we're going to be here another five. Bezais ..."

The next twenty lines were taken up with a description of what Bezais had done. Then about some firewood.

"I'm sick with pining for you," he read. "Oh, how happy I'd be to see you. My heart's aflame when I think of you...."

He shook his head. "My heart's aflame." Funny, why was it that when you wrote, the words came out better than when you spoke? Such words had never come into his mind when he was talking to her. Instead, he said all kinds of idiotic things like: "How are you feeling?" or "What's new?"

"I'm writing this letter more for myself than for you because it will reach you the same time I will," he read farther on. "I feel I'm talking to you and that once again it's evening and frosty and we're standing near that little bench next to the hostel. I've never loved any other woman like I love you. I feel strangely confident that we've come together for a long time—for years...."

He felt somewhat uneasy and tore the letter into tiny scraps.

Then he came across various papers connected with their trip in the railway carriage: several sheets from a notebook on which they had played noughts and crosses, railway tickets and caricatures that he and Bezais had made of each other. All these scraps reminded him of the good times—the stove, the stained kettle and the old, ramshackle coach which had borne them on towards their destiny. Another funny thing: Why do people want to do just those things that they can't do?

This led him on to another thought. Hadn't he himself ridden roughshod over comrades who had fallen in the grass, and, without looking back, hurtled on to where the rifles gleamed in the enemy's line, simply because there had been no time and no possibility to stop and say a last word to them. Others had been able to fall and die in lonely silence. Why couldn't he?

"I'm no softy," he told himself.

There was a hole in the pocket of his jacket, and a hard square object had lodged in the lining. He fingered it through the cloth and arched his brows.

"Let's have a look at it," he whispered. "What could it be?" He got his fingers to it, knowing full well what it was.

It was a photograph of Lisa taken off some identification card, smeared with rubber stamps and ink. He pulled it out and tore it up before he had time to regret it.

What hurt him most was the fact that in the town, at its cold sharp corners, people were going about

their work. They were gripped by that work the way a cartridge clip grips the cartridges, but he, a spent cartridge, had been thrown out of the clip and lay pressed into the earth, trodden on by the feet of others.

He recalled the previous evening, the smoke, Nikola's dark eyes, the samovar. He realized that he's made a fool of himself. He should have spoken quite another way. Leaning against the wall, propped on his crutches, he went over that talk with Nikola again—he fumed with indignation, he implored and joked, watching his face in the mirror opposite. After all, they found work for girls, even for girls. That angered him more than anything. He was really not so bad as appeared at first sight. He could shoot, at least kneeling.

He drew his revolver, removed all the cartridges from the chambers, knelt on one knee in the middle of the room and, aiming carefully at the ink-pot, squeezed the trigger. This gave him some slight satisfaction. He was aiming at his own fate—at the past, in which that stupid bullet had played so decisive a part—at his empty future. That crazy train had carried him for thousands of versts, the bridges groaning under the wheels, the snow whirling past. He had been in a hurry, counting every minute yet only to get a bullet in his left shin-bone somewhere on the road between a fence and a bird-box. And his future was a pair of crutches and a quiet political study circle twice a week. At meetings women would offer him their seats. "Please sit down, Comrade Matveyev. We can stand."

The idea of this study circle gave him no peace. Of

course, any kind of work was good and necessary. But once he had visited a home for blind children. The children sat in a wretched room plaiting baskets. He looked into their sightless eyes with a keen sense of pity and left after five minutes—he could not bear to see their futile work. There you are! It was one thing to run a study circle when it was necessary, but it was another thing to run one because you were fit for nothing else.

He raised his body heavily from the floor and reloaded his revolver. Words for fools! How good it would be to do something out of the ordinary, something desperate. To show them what he was made of. Save someone's life or blow up the barracks. Or assassinate the town commandant. So that Nikola would run up to him and shake his hand and say: "I'm sorry. I was wrong, honestly I was, you're capable of leaving all the fit ones behind."

But at once he realized that all his dreams were absurd, nonsensical. If he was going to deceive himself, then at least he ought not to do it in such a silly way. It really would be cleverer to eat his porridge and go back to bed. And now the immediate problem was to think of some way of killing time till dinner.

Bezais ought to have come in to see him but for some reason he was late. Matveyev began to roam the room, counting the floor-boards. He was puzzled what to do with himself.

And then he had an idea which seemed splendid to him. He decided to write a novel. It was not as silly as playing noughts and crosses and certainly more interesting than combing through old papers.

The idea made him feel more cheerful and he began to think better of himself. He pictured the novel in thousands of brilliant colours and his enthusiasm grew. For half an hour he moved about the room, bumping into chairs, looking for his pen and some paper. Then he sat at the table and dashed off several pages. Bezais found him pale and exhausted but very pleased with himself.

"I'm terribly busy just now," Matveyev told him. "If there's something you need, tell me what it is straight away."

"I've come in only for a minute. The girls are fixing up something with the first-aid unit. It's Kaverin's idea. They're acting high and mighty as if without them the whole plan would collapse."

Matveyev got up and went to the bed.

"I've decided to do something that will please you," he said. "I want to give you my revolver. Your Smith's no good at all except for hammering nails. It's just a piece of iron. Mine, though ..."

He drew from under the pillow the big, lovingly oiled revolver. Bezais's was a small Smith and Wesson .32, a shiny little thing as pitiful as a cheap toy which gave its owner more moral support than means of defence. Matveyev's was black and massive, with a splendid dull gleam. Its lines were simple and austere, those of a real military weapon, unerring and reliable, meant to kill. Shutting his left eye, Matveyev drew aim and squeezed the trigger. The mechanism worked with the pure, high ring of well-tempered steel. Matveyev dropped his hand.

"When you take aim, aim slightly to the left and

don't let anybody fool around with the trigger. It'll spoil it."

He gripped the butt as one grips the hand of a comrade.

"I got it at the Gubernia Cheka. We killed an agent. Here you are."

"I won't take it," said Bezais quietly.

He wanted to leave. The handing over of the revolver struck him as being something like a painful, alarming ceremony.

"Come on, take it. It hits at two hundred paces and as far as I know hasn't misfired once in several years."

"You've already given me your knife."

"Well, now you'll have my revolver."

"It might still be useful to you. Why are you giving it away?"

Matveyev laid the revolver on Bezais's knee.

"Take it. I'm tired of it..."

He turned away hurriedly to the table and picked up his pen.

"What was it you wanted to tell me?"

"It's this. This roll of posters has to be hidden. It's the appeal issued by headquarters. My own work, incidentally. Have you ever been in a print-shop? I looked like a Negro after working there. You see, if we keep them in the dining-room or in any of the other rooms the kids will get at them and make paper pigeons of them and that might end very badly. I'll put them here on the window-sill. All right?"

"Put them there."

"They're spare ones, about thirty. It's not my turn today. The lads from Chuzhoi's group are sticking

them up today. I'm on tomorrow night. Would you like to see how they look? God, how I sweated over them!"

"What's special about them? D'you think I haven't seen printed paper before?"

Bezais left the room quite astonished. But the moment the door closed behind him Matveyev hobbled to the window-sill and drew out from the roll a sheet of thick, coarse paper. He stared at it for a long time with a vague feeling of jealousy. So that was Bezais's work—fancy that!

Then he went back to the table and worked hard on his novel. It really did help to kill time. The words crowded before his eyes, jostling each other. He did not know how he was going to end his tale but that did not worry him. The main thing was that he had something to do, that he was working with an objective as he had done in the past. All he had to do was to work hard, the rest would come, he thought.

A pale mist swirled like smoke in the yard. The prickly branch of pine was still swaying, like a pendulum counting the seconds. The old man came in, tormented by some new story, but Matveyev dealt with him ruthlessly. Later, the tabby cat came in, arching its back servilely, and sat opposite him with its green eyes gleaming. He bore with it for a few minutes and then grew angry, flung a box of matches at it and shouted: "You stupid thing!"

His tale pleased him. Put on paper, the most ordinary words acquired a special meaning, a new flavour. Little by little out of the chaotic motley mass, events, people and names took shape. The words fell into place and stood erect like men in ranks.

He wrote down everything that came into his head, without any plan. It seemed to him that all he had to do was to invent as many characters as he could and give them some occupation or other, and that then they would sort out their various activities for themselves. In the joy of creation he outlined people, gave them outward appearance, habits, made them love and hate each other. To begin with he married off a worker to the daughter of a manufacturer just to see what would come out of it. She curled her hair, watered the flowers and whispered gossip to her ginger cat. Her father caught flies and tore off their wings. He was the quintessence of all vices, and Matveyev could not think of him without a feeling of revulsion.

He liked powerful situations which aroused horror and overwhelmed the imagination. He did not like quiet, timid books in which ordinary people move and go round saying ordinary things. He wanted to think up words of indescribable beauty to make his novel sparkle and thunder. Fire and blood—that was what he needed. He described a raid on a town and began to kill off people recklessly, people on both sides. He set fire to the town and blew up the water-tower. The paper reeked with blood and his pen glowed with words of fire. He read through what he had written and flung in a handful of dots and exclamation marks to liven it up and add fire. When he lay down to sleep that night he smiled with satisfaction. His day had not been wasted.

Next morning, sleepy and tousle-headed, he returned to the table and wrote till dinner-time. He put everything he had got into the writing, working like a cart-horse till he felt completely exhausted. Bezais

did not come in, something for which Matveyev was grateful. He tried not to look around the room and to keep his mind on his work.

While wandering around the room after dinner he went to the window and mechanically picked up one of the appeals. The print was uneven and the letters lay piled up like heaps of caviare. He read the appeal from beginning to end. Then he reread it. It ended with these words, printed in big lettering:

"Take up arms and join the fighting ranks.

"Long Live the Power of Labour!

"Death to the Murderers!"

He put the leaflet down and reeled back from the window as if he had been dealt a blow. Those commonplace, familiar phrases struck him to the heart: they might have been addressed directly to him.

And when, later, he returned to his novel it was clear to him that he would never finish it. Incredulously, he reread what he had written: surely he couldn't have written that! There were so many corpses in it that it was like a cemetery, a common grave. That wouldn't do at all. Writing was obviously more difficult than he had thought. He had created his own characters, given them the gift of speech and put them in place, and then they had begun to live independently. They had broken away from his power and acted just as it pleased them. The main character, a Communist, stood up at a crucial meeting, when the town was threatened by bandits, and talked such rubbish that Matveyev felt quite embarrassed for the fellow's sake. He tried his best but the result was awful.

Matveyev pushed the paper aside. His story was not worth as much as a single comma in that appeal which someone had hurriedly written.

Varya's mother brought in an armful of firewood and fed the stove. It was dark in the room. Matveyev did not light the lamp. He went over to the stove and stared aimlessly into the flames for a full hour. This was the end—he was beginning to feel that he really was good for nothing.

A gust of cold came into the room as though someone had opened the door. With it came a tremendous silence whose breath stirred Matveyev's hair. The ice on the window-panes looked like transparent moss. The round moon stared straight through the window and its dead light mingled with the palpitating reflections of the stove like blue and red paint being mixed on a palette. Shadows prowled across the walls as in a haunted house.

Matveyev got out of bed and patiently set about dressing. Bumping against pieces of furniture in the darkness and muttering curses against everything that got in his way, he groped for his overcoat. His hat had disappeared somewhere; he ransacked the room but it seemed to have vanished. At least twenty times his hand fell on his left boot, and this drove him practically into a frenzy. He hurled it into a corner and then groped over every inch of the room again only to find himself, a few minutes later, touching that boot. Finally, he sat down on the floor and mopped his brow.

"I must rest a bit and think," he said. "There's no sense in hurrying, I've plenty of spare time, loads of it. Where is the damned thing?"

Having regained[•] his breath he resumed his search. He went to the window and from there started a real search which covered everything. He bumped his head on a corner of the chest of drawers, then knocked over a green vase of feather grass and it broke with such a crash that he shuddered.

"I knew that would happen," he whispered, rubbing his head.

It took him ten minutes to find the hat. Of course, it lay on the most obvious place—on a chair. He snatched at it like a hunter who has finally cornered his prey.

In order to dress he had to go over to the bed, and there, holding to the bed-head with one hand, he got into his coat and buttoned it up. Then he took the roll of posters and a pot of glue, and went to the door. Suddenly he stopped and began to laugh. There was something he had to do before he left. He swept up the pages of the manuscript from the table, went over to the stove and stuffed them into the flames with a sense of malicious satisfaction. The flames remedied everything: in a minute there was nothing left but a rustling pile of ashes. With a light heart Matveyev left the room.

The dining-room was empty. He went to the next door and peeped through it cautiously. Varya's mother was on her knees undressing her younger son and telling him in a low voice the fibs mothers always tell about good little boys who don't tear their trousers, like cod-liver oil and never pinch sugar from the sideboard. The two little boys, crushed by a sense of their own wickedness, were glum and silent.

She took a long time undressing the children and

Matveyev began to fear that Bezais would come in. Having put them to bed she put out the light and left the room. Matveyev pressed himself to the wall. She almost brushed against him as she walked past. He waited a little and then slipped into the hall. There he groped for the latch for several minutes, mortally afraid that he would be discovered, but when he had practically resigned himself to the worst, the door opened silently. He went out into the yard.

It seemed an eternity since he had last breathed fresh air. He filled his lungs with that excellent thick air, feeling his blood grow warmer and his whole body acquire a playful strength. Too long had he lolled in bed taking medicine. They should have fed him on meat from the start and let him outside to gulp down real air. Then, perhaps, everything would have been different.

Angular shadows, black as soot, lay across the yard, but the edge of the snow-topped fence was outlined by a narrow band of light. He opened the wicket and went out into the street, clutching the heavy roll of posters to his chest. The street was empty, and only just visible in the occasional pools of light cast by the lamps. Bathed in moonlight, it looked cosy, like a greetings-card with Christmas-tree candles and playful hares on it. Birch-trees cast lace-like shadows across the street. A lonely couple clung together on a bench—on such a night it is good to sit in silence, kissing and keeping each other's hands warm. The moon gazed down on the town, the snow glowed with a blue light. Matveyev crossed the street and went along the dark side at the measured pace of a man who is walking for pleasure.

There was only one thing he regretted: that the idea of doing this had not come into his mind earlier. What he had to do was to get out and show them what he was capable of.

He had regained the self-confidence of a man sound in limb, a man who knew how to give as good as he could take. It made him laugh now to recall how Nikola had said that someone would have to look after him, Matveyev.

"I'm still good for something," he said happily, aware of the massive strength of his arms and shoulders.

He crossed a bridge, the planks ringing dully under his feet. Near a long low warehouse a night-watchman dozed in his sheepskin. Matveyev walked past him carefully, pressing to the fence, and, rather nervously, unwrapped a poster. Now he had to put the pot down and smear paste on the back of the poster. His first attempt was unsuccessful: the paper broke at two places, he got his fingers sticky, then dropped the brush. He found it very difficult to stoop. He looked remorsefully at the torn appeal.

"Don't be in a hurry and don't worry," he whispered. "Bezais says it's bad for me."

He noted that he had kept his ability to joke and this made his spirits rise. He fussed for a few minutes, fumbling for the brush and swearing hard. Then he set about his work again. He pressed the pot against the fence with his knee and this freed his hands. He had to hold the paper between his teeth and even under his chin. Spreading it on the fence he stepped back and admired his work. What nonsense

Nikola had talked. This was no worse than anybody else's work.

Then he invented a new method and began to paste up the posters near a bench on which he could stand the pot. He worked with a will; he had quite lost his initial fear of being caught. At the street corner some cabbies were freezing on their high perches. He asked them what time it was and then said that there would probably be a thaw the next day, and went on, chuckling to himself. Tomorrow there would be something better than a thaw—for him, at least. This thought made him feel quite cheerful; stopping near a telegraph pole he pasted up a poster in the full light with cold-blooded impudence and unhurriedly turned a corner. There new opportunities presented themselves in the shape of a pillar-box and, a little farther on, a pump-house. Looking back he saw the white sheets of paper gleaming in the moonlight.

The town lay before him with new streets with front gardens, trees sleeping mutely under their mantle of frost. The wind of the old days blew in his face and made his blood tingle. He went on, his coat unbuttoned, straight into the wind, oblivious of everything except this unaccustomed agonizing joy. He was going to catch up his comrades, no matter where it took him—over the Ukrainian steppes which he had ridden across from end to end or over this mother-of-pearl snow. Ghostly regiments marched through the uncertain mist, the saddle leather creaked, cigarettes smouldered, and here, on these bewitched streets, he heard the Kuban sabres clinking against the stirrups. Horses, horses, happy days that melted into the sky, into smoke.

And then a shot rang out behind him, the sound echoing in tiny reverberations. He was not frightened. The shot was the culmination of the sad music of that night. He dug a hand into his pocket, and suddenly remembered he had given his revolver to Bezais.

"I'm in a fix," he whispered, stunned.

Shot after shot rang out behind him in rapid succession and bullets bored the blue mist. He heard footsteps and a warning cry:

"Halt!"

He had spoiled the game himself, but now it was pointless, too late, to cry over spilt milk. With all his strength he hurried on, bounding on his crutches. It wasn't too bad ... might be worse, anyway. He cast his eyes about, looking for an open gate but there was not a single crack in the fence.

The shooting had stopped. Now they were pursuing him in silence. Turning a corner he caught a glimpse of two figures in greatcoats, carrying rifles. He redoubled his efforts and pressed on, swinging on his crutches at what seemed to him a mad speed. I'm going to get away, he decided suddenly and his heart sang within him like a bird.

But there were three other men running towards him from the opposite direction; he could already see their bayonets and the light tan of their leather cartridge pouches. Leading them, his long coat flapping, ran an officer—Matveyev clearly saw his straps and the sword that he steadied with his hand.

Matveyev hurled away the roll of posters and the paste-pot—they clattered noisily on the ground—dashed into a dark narrow alley that ran between two buildings, and froze in his paces, his flaming

face pressed against the ice-cold stone of the wall. Here everything was black and motionless; ahead the entrance to the blind alley glittered like a silver door.

The heavy drumming of boots approached from both directions. The first to arrive were the two soldiers who had spotted him. Rifles clanging, they stopped just before the entrance to the alley and did not show themselves. A few seconds later the others came up from the left. They arrived at the march, their coats brushing against the wall, because now their prey had no means of escaping. They exchanged remarks with the first two men.

"Is that you, Khamidulin?" A soldier on the right said something in reply.

"Are you armed?" This was meant for Matveyev.

"No."

There were more hurried exchanges, the sound of footsteps, and then the officer appeared in the entrance—an elderly man with a moustache and a bandaged cheek. He stood with his revolver thrust forward.

"Hands up."

Matveyev remained silent. They wanted to capture him without any trouble, like taking a parcel from the counter—but at least he wasn't going to let that happen.

"Come here. I've got something to settle with you," he replied.

The threat was impotent, pitiful—and the officer knew it. This man was unarmed, otherwise he would have fired.

"Come on out of there."

"I won't," said Matveyev in a hollow voice.

The officer sighed, put his revolver back into its holster and adjusted his bandage. He had heard this many times before and was moved neither to curiosity nor fear by it. He remained quite indifferent. They all staked their hopes on some last, crazy chance. It was funny they didn't understand there was a law, a firm, immutable law which you can no more argue with than you can with a lump of stone. People have a morbid interest in their last moments. Of course, a cornered man thinks that he is the first man on earth ever to have faced death.

"Come on, out with you," he said patiently.

Matveyev did not reply. He kept his back pressed into the corner and thrust his crutches out a little before him. That steadied him. The alley he was in was narrow, less than a pace from wall to wall; on the left was a house, on the right the rugged stone wall of a barn. The soldiers, their rifles slung, stood in a semicircle before the entrance to the blind alley, the rifle-barrels and the edges of their bayonets caught the moonlight. Directly over Matveyev's head was a window covered with a shutter, and through the slits a yellow light cast a delicate network on the rugged wall of the barn. There, inside the house, someone was playing scales on a piano, playing obstinately, persistently, as if knocking nails on the head. The scales climbed in stages, till they reached the highest note and then descended to the growling bass.

"Come on, out with you. Don't make a fuss."

For a brief second Matveyev played with the idea of coming out. To get it over more quickly, he thought. But his whole being protested against doing

that—he'd see this through to the end—and he went on standing there. Silence fell and then the light in the passage went out. Propping his rifle against the wall, one of the soldiers took a step forward to pull him out, like a calf being dragged to the knife. He drew nearer, groping along the wall with his hands. Suddenly he was stopped by a sharp blow on the bridge of his nose. Before he had grasped what had happened another blow struck him between the throat and the jaw, shaking his whole body and driving his head back and hurling him sideways on to the snow like a sack.

The soldier scrambled to his feet, trembling with surprise, and heard the blood roaring in his ears. He did not understand what had happened and rushed forward blindly to fall on Matveyev with his heavy body and trample him down with his heavy army boots. That was as far as he could see. Before him stood a cripple, a man on crutches, defenceless—and yet he dared to fight back. He struck out aimlessly at arm's length. His fist thudded home somewhere—on Matveyev's ear or chest.

But the soldier paid dearly for the blow. Rapid, well-aimed blows poured on him—on his chin, his lips, his nose—blows that were directed by a clear eye and heavy fists. They confused the soldier, gave him no time to pull himself together; they screened Matveyev like a wall. It was an art before which the clumsy peasant boy's broad, vague lunges and aimless fury were hopeless.

The soldier rushed in again only to be repulsed once more by Matveyev's unerring strength. Then there was a pause, followed by a new blow which

again fell between the soldier's jaw and throat. And finally a last, terrible, desperately powerful blow in the stomach, inflicted by a momentary release of every muscle. It penetrated the greatcoat, the padded lining. The rough Japanese underwear provided no protection. The soldier's knees crumpled, and he folded in two. The pain was more than he could bear, and he crawled back into the street, forgetting how all this had begun.

For several incredulous minutes Matveyev heard the idiotic scale-player hammering away on the piano, up and down the keyboard from the growling bass up to the tiny shrill treble. Then three soldiers rushed jostling into the passage at the same time. They were urged on by a disinterested desire to beat up their man—to beat him up not too badly, not to the point of drawing blood—more of a game than a serious killing. But from the first moment they realized that their man was playing the game in earnest. In a minute they got what was coming to them—mostly in the face. Matveyev distributed his blows generously, by the handful, displaying his brilliant skill and keeping all three of his opponents at arm's length.

There are times when the astonishing, the impossible happens. One wonderful minute stands out above all others and burns with fire, but then the usual order of things is restored—that has always happened since the world began to turn. He fought all three of them together—yes, he, a cripple!—but his time was running out. It was incredible that one man on crutches could stand up against three well-nourished men. One of his crutches snapped, and that

spelled the end of Matveyev's splendid moment. The time came when he had to fall to the ground, when the three soldiers trampled on him, their heels barking the walls, their cartridge pouches rattling.

"Drag him out here, you fools," said the officer, listening impatiently to the rumpus.

This was easier said than done. Matveyev resisted with all his might, wriggling like mad and not yielding an inch. All the men could do was to beat him and this they did with a will, striking at him with all their might, unhurriedly and deliberately, as if they were beating dust out of a mattress. Finally, they dragged him out by the arms, panting heavily and shaking at every step.

Again Matveyev saw the dazzlingly triumphant moon and the blue snow. The officer looked down and examined Matveyev's leg. The fourth soldier stood leaning against the wall, spitting angrily; in the moonlight his face looked deadly pale. The posters lay scattered on the ground, fluttering in the wind like dying things.

"Can you walk?"

They had beaten him up badly. Something had happened to his left hand—one of them must have trodden on it, for the fingers were swollen and he bent them with difficulty. But it was his head that had received most damage. His lips were split and bleeding, and there was a deep cut on the nape of his neck. He spat blood and said:

"I can't manage without crutches. One of them's broken."

Suddenly to his surprise he felt tears trickling down

his face which had grown wooden from fatigue and weariness.

"Maybe we can deal with him right here, sir," said one of the soldiers behind him.

Breathing on his frozen fingers the officer cast the man an angry glance.

"None of your fooling now. Don't be in too much of a hurry. Pick up that paper. And what's the matter with you? Give him his crutches."

When the soldier who was gripping him by the left arm bent down for the crutches, Matveyev prayed for only one thing: to be able to keep his balance for a few seconds. Holding his breath, he suddenly wrenched his left arm free and with a sharp movement of his whole body swung on his heel and struck the second soldier with his bruised hand. The violence of the blow made him reel back himself; he grasped the man's arm and they fell together.

This was his last fight and he put all he had left into it. At moments he managed to press the man to the ground, at others he broke free with a sudden movement and struck him with all his might. Time was running out and he struck out rapidly, dealing several blows at once. One of the soldiers kept trying to hit in the groin, a foul, bandit's blow—and Matveyev, to his great satisfaction, contrived to kick him on the chest.

He succeeded in freeing his head and dug his teeth convulsively into someone's hand. Not for a moment did he have any illusions. Arithmetic was against him: no one had ever managed to get even with that damned science. It had only four rules and did not brook arguments or pleas.

"You're biting—oh, you're biting," he heard one of the men say in a broken voice.

With a desperate effort he flung off a soldier who was clinging to his throat. Suddenly the sky and the earth burst in a deafening roar. For a second his blood froze and then it gushed in a hot stream. The moon zigzagged down from the sky and the snow turned hot. Near by, right up against his eyes, he saw a boot, heavy and massive as an iron.

Life departed from his body with each beat of his heart. A great cherry-red stain spread over the snow. But Matveyev was too tough to die at once. Mechanically, almost without realizing what he was doing, he rolled over on to his stomach and slowly drew up his knees under his body. Then, inch by inch, tensing all his strength, he raised himself on his hands into a crouching position and lifted his pale face to the soldiers. It was time to give up and make his bow—but he could not get rid of that odd habit of living.

"A tough devil," he heard. "Gave us a lot of trouble."

The words filled him with insane pride. This tribute had come a little late, but all the same it had come at last. Now he had got all his due. Again he stood in the ranks and looked on others as their equal and went with them straight ahead, through life and death. Bent to the snowy earth under the intolerable weight of his ebbing strength he twisted his broken lips into a smile.

Suddenly he saw an enormous shadow. Before him, alone in the empty town, stood his horse, with the white heart-shaped mark on its brow. It gazed at him with devoted dark eyes. The black mane was shot with silver, the chiselled legs stood firm.

“You?”

He grasped the bridle, sprang into the cool saddle and flew straight down the long moonlit road to catch up his own men.

“You see . . . I’m . . . not as bad as all that . . .” he whispered as though in answer to a question someone had put to him in the past.

His vanity was satisfied for the last time.

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